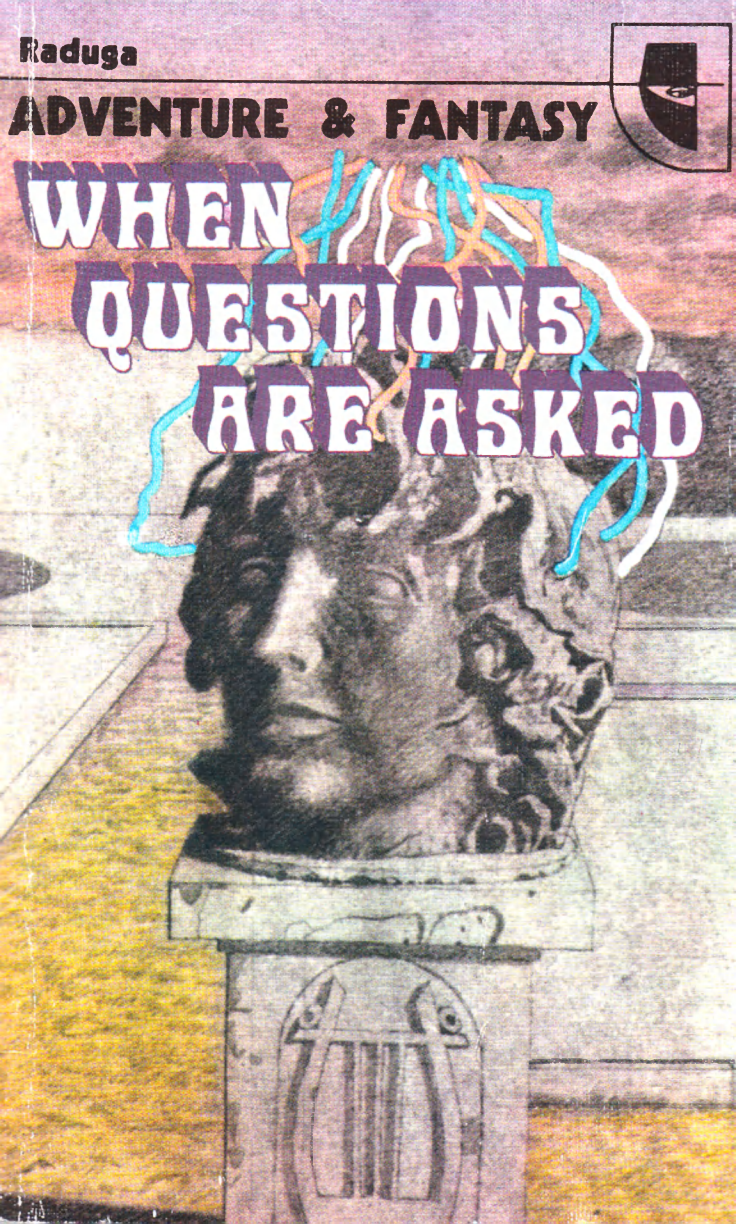
Raduga

ADVENTURE & FANTASY

WHEN QUESTIONS ARE ASKED



Adventure
Fantasy

WHEN QUESTIONS ARE ASKED

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ANATOLY DNEPROV

WHEN QUESTIONS ARE ASKED

We still call our annual get-togethers "students' parties" in memory of our distant but exhilarating university days. The new main building of Moscow State University at Lenin Hills has long been completed, and the five-story treasure-chest of the physics department has been taken over by new generations of Lomonosovs and Einsteins. Physicists and lyricists have long been arguing in the well-appointed, sound-proofed hall. But we still can't forget the cosy vaulted basement which housed the old University Student Club on Hertzen Street in downtown Moscow. So every year, we gather here, have a look at each other, and take a head count—who is still around, and who is no longer among the living. Here, we talk and argue about science

and life, as we did so many years ago...

It was no different at that particular party, but for some reason, we couldn't keep a conversation going. No one offered a single idea; no one objected to what had been said, and suddenly we felt that the last interesting gathering was the one that had been held the previous year, and that there was no hope for the future of our meetings.

"We have reached that venerable age when ideas and opinions have at last taken on their final form and have their final content," Fyodor Yegoryev, a Ph. D. and corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences, announced with bitter irony.

"A jolly state of affairs, indeed," noted Vladimir Migai, the director of a prestigious scientific institute. "And exactly what do you mean by final content?"

"That's when nothing can be added to what already is," Fyodor explained gloomily. "Next, natural decline begins, and no additions can be made whatsoever during that phase. The intellectual life of a human being can be expressed in a succinct maxim. Somewhere around the age of forty-five..."

"There's no need to continue. We all know that without your lectures. But really, fellows, I simply can't believe that I'm no longer capable of taking in any new ideas—not a single new theory or new science. That is simply horrible!"

Leonid Samozvantsev, a roly-poly little physicist with a unique manner of speaking rapidly and swallowing endings and entire

words, did not look at all like a forty-five-year-old man. He was reminded of this on every appropriate occasion.

"You've been terribly lucky, Leonid. You were always a sickly child and had an incurable case of infantilism. You can not only think up a new theory of space and time—you can actually learn the old one."

Everyone laughed, remembering how Leonid had retaken the exam on the theory of relativity four times before he finally passed.

Samozvantsev quickly gulped down the contents of his goblet:

"Don't worry. There won't be any new theories."

"Why is that?" asked Migai.

"The times aren't right, and the people are different."

"Somehow I don't quite follow you."

"I didn't say exactly what I meant," Leonid began to explain. "Of course, there will be new theories, so to speak, but they will be related to the verification of old theories. Like calculating pi to yet another decimal point. Or adding yet another member to the sum of an infinite progression. But there's no way an absolutely new theory can be created. No way..."

Samozvantsev emphasized the "absolutely"...

Hearing that an interesting conversation was getting started, the fellows from various corners of the low-ceilinged but wide room approached our table.

"Then define what you mean by an 'absolutely new theory'."

"Well, for example, the electromagnetic theory of light as opposed to the ether theory—Young's transverse-wave concept of light—if you will recall."

"Ha, ha!" guffawed Georgy Sychev, as if he were just waking up. He raised an aluminum crutch—a grim souvenir of the Second World War—poked Leonid in the side, and addressed them all at once: "This physicist wants to tell us that Maxwell is not the last member of an infinite progression after Young. Ho, ho, old man! Give us a new example or I'll fall asleep again from boredom."

"OK, take Faraday, for example. He discovered electromagnetic induction..."

"Well, so what?"

"That discovery was revolutionary in that it unified electricity and magnetism, and based on this new field, electronic technology appeared."

"So what?" Sychev continued to press him.

Like most legless men, he had a tendency to stoutness. He was quite fat, with a podgy face that looked too old for his age.

"But the fact is, Faraday didn't know anything about your Young and his theory of the ether and elastic solids. To say nothing of Maxwell. Maxwell simply extended Faraday's ideas to formulate his celebrated equation."

Sychev threw back his head and gave an affected chuckle.

"Stop your sniggering, Georgy!" snapped Migai. "Leonid has a point. Continue, Leonid, and don't pay any attention to him."

"I'm sure that if Faraday had been well, at least as smart as we are..."

Everyone who had gathered around them burst into laughter.

"Don't laugh. If he had been as smart as we are, he would never have made a single discovery..."

Everyone fell silent in a heartbeat and stared at Samozvantsev. He blinked in confusion, holding his goblet to his lips.

"There's something to the method of making blind stabs in the dark. We have a whole bunch of talented fellows and gals working at our institute. They never go pouring over scientific journals to look for hints that might point them in the right direction when they're looking for the solution to a given problem. They just try one thing and another in hopes that something will work. Almost like Faraday did."

"See now? And do they get anywhere?"

"Yes, if you can believe it. And I must admit, that particular bunch of kids comes up with the most original solutions."

Fyodor, our corresponding member, could no longer restrain himself:

"Now you are beginning to sound like you think it's better to do scientific research when you don't know anything at all. Physicists have always had a tendency to play with paradoxes. But we're too old for all that now..."

"I'm sick of all this talk about encroaching senility! Let Leonid talk. So you say Faraday was just making stabs in the dark?"

"Of course. He was a curious lad. What will

happen if we strike a magnet with a hammer? What will happen if we warm a magnet to red heat? Will a cat's eyes glow in the dark if we don't feed it? And so on and so forth. The most awkward 'what will happen ifs' imaginable... And in posing himself a number of questions, he found the answers by performing experiments. Therefore by groping around in the dark, he hit upon all the phenomena and effects he later formulated in his new theories. And to us smart fellows, it seems that no 'what will happen ifs' exist... For us, theories are primary."

"Well, yes," remarked our corresponding member vaguely and stepped aside. Several others followed him.

"So it seems we should support those who don't know a bloody thing," chucked Vladimir Migai. "Perhaps we shall find another Faraday among them."

"There's a really simple way of finding Faradays," interrupted Nikolai Zavoisky, our most outstanding theoretician, a Ph. D., and also a corresponding member. His exceedingly aristocratic mannerisms had always put us off a bit.

"OK, so tell us your method for locating Faradays."

"We must hold a national contest for the best 'what will happen if'... The participants will pose themselves questions and then provide the answers. Of course, demonstrating them experimentally. And the Faraday question will be the one for which contemporary theory cannot provide an answer."

Everyone liked the idea, and all the physicists who had been taciturn up to that point got quite lively and began to play "Faraday". Cries of "what will happen if..." rang out all over the room. Everyone present gathered in a knot and the game got pretty wild. They all asked the craziest of questions and gave their own answers.

"What will happen if you put spectacles on a sperm-whale?"

"What will happen if you boil a meteorite in cow's milk?"

"What will happen if you run a million ampere electric charge through a person for a millionth of a second?"

"What will happen if..."

The questions came fast and furious. Everyone answered them all at once. The calculations, equations, and references to different sources began. In general, everything then known about physics was made use of, and soon we realized that it was extremely difficult, but nonetheless possible, to ask a Faraday question. And, the devil take it all, such a question always seemed to be one contemporary physics was grappling with at that point. Leonid Samozvantsev, the one who had started all this mess, sighed with disappointment:

"And I thought we would be able to report to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences on the necessity of founding a new scientific institute which would engage exclusively in Faraday research."

"Hey, fellows, do you remember Alexei

Monin? Remember how we used to call him 'Faraday' back in our university days? I wonder if that nickname has stuck."

We fell silent, and all gazes turned to Alexandra Korneva, the chief organizer of the present "students' party". Red-haired and freckled, she had never attempted to look beautiful.

"Well, Alexandra, why isn't our friend Alexei here?"

"He couldn't come today."

"Well, why not?"

"He's on night duty at the clinic this evening... And anyway, he said..."

"He said what?"

"He said that he felt out of place at our parties. He said almost all of us are Academicians, or at the very worst, Ph. D's. And he says he's only... Well, you know..."

And of course, we understood what he meant very well. We all thought Monin had been terribly unlucky, but that it was his own fault. It was enough to observe how he did his physics lab work to become completely convinced that he would never amount to anything. Instead of simply carrying out his assignment and noting the frequency characteristics of a generator, he would sit for hours in front of the oscilloscope admiring the wild figures being traced by the electronic beam. "Alexei, you have to shield the wires. Otherwise, you'll never get anywhere." "Any fool knows that if you shield the wires, you'll get the results you need. But what will happen if you don't shield the wires?" "Silly boy, ordin-

ary interference. There's a line-operated current from the x-ray machine in the lab next door..." Alexei smiled mysteriously and shielded his wires. The figures on the screen changed but remained just as wild.

"You haven't shielded them well enough. Put the lid on the oscilloscope." He put the lid on, but the situation didn't get any better. "Ground the oscilloscope casing." He grounded it, and the picture got even more peculiar. No one else got the kind of results Alexei did. Instead of finding the frequency characteristics of his generator, he filled a thick oilcloth-covered notebook with illegible scribbles. His report read like a science fiction story about the strange behavior of the generator when the wires were shielded or unshielded, when the amplifying valve was subjected to forced air cooling from the ventilator, or when a wet rag was placed on it. All these experiments evolved into such a collection of mishmash that he didn't pass his physics lab in the end.

Our main problem at the old dormitory on Stromynka Street was how to get washed as quickly as possible in the morning. Naturally, the students wanted to sleep as late as possible—until seven at least—and then they went rushing to the showers all at once. There was an enormous line and a crowd of fellows pushing and shoving to get into the showers or at least to a wash basin.

One morning, because of this latter-day Faraday, our whole group was late for class. There was a long line as usual, and Alexei was

leaning over a wash basin casting spells or some such.

"What's the matter, Faraday? Have you fallen asleep?"

"No. Take a look at this..."

The sink was stopped up, and there was dirty water almost to the top. Alexei dropped a pinch of tooth powder into the basin, and the little particles quickly dispersed to the outer edges of the water's surface.

"So what's the big deal? Surface tension and nothing more... Let's go..."

But Alexei had no intention of moving.

"Just watch what happens now..."

He dropped another pinch of tooth powder into the water, but this time, the particles moved quickly toward each other and clumped all together. We all froze to the spot."

"Well, do it again."

He repeated the experiment. As it turned out, if the powder was dropped from one height, the particles raced apart. If they were dropped from another, they clumped together.

All the physics majors from all five years at the university put stoppers into the wash basins, filled them with water, and began sprinkling tooth powder into the water. Our future corresponding member Fyodor Yegoryev experimented with tobacco hastily pulled from the tips of his cigarettes. The foppish theoretician Zavoisky brought three different brands of tooth powder to try. The guys brought powdered sugar, salt, sulphur from match sticks, headache powders, and the devil

knows what else. A tense atmosphere prompted by the fevered experimentation descended over the shower room. The various powders behaved in the wildest fashion imaginable. On the surface of the water, they clumped together, dispersed to the very edges of the basins, finally sinking to the bottom. More powder was sprinkled. They swirled in place, formed galactic clouds and planetary systems. They raced forward in straight lines and even hopped about. And their behaviour was totally dependent upon the height from which they were sprinkled, whether there was soap in the water or not, or whether other powders had been dropped previously. Everything we physics majors had been taught about surface tension since our second year at the university came crashing down like a house of cards, and the culprit in all this was Alexei Monin.

"Too bad he's not here. A peculiar chap, that," Fyodor Yegoryev sighed. "And a real Faraday, but an unsuccessful one."

"He probably didn't ask himself the right questions."

"Like, 'What will happen if I don't get home on time...' "

It was already one in the morning, so we all burst out laughing. That had been said by Abraham Chaiter, our "amateur atomic physicist", as we dubbed him due to his passion for publishing popular science articles on atomic physics. His field was totally unrelated to atomic physics. Everyone knew Abraham had a terribly jealous wife.

We started to leave.

It was drizzling outside, the streets looked deserted. We said goodbye, and everyone headed for the taxi stand. Four of us paused by the exit to have a smoke—Fyodor Yegoryev, Vladimir Migai, Leonid Samozvantsev, and I.

"In our day, a tram ran along here—remember?" said Fyodor. "One day, I found Alexei standing rooted to the spot right over there, staring up at the sky. Do you know what he had been observing for two hours or more?"

We had no idea.

"The sparks that were flying from the spot where the trolley shoe touched the overhead wires. He said he had been observing them for a whole week, and that there was definitely a relationship between the weather and the color of the sparks. I read about that very phenomenon not long ago—it had been written up as a new discovery..."

"Why don't we go pay him a visit right now?" I suggested. "Somehow it doesn't seem right that we've been having a good time while he's at work all alone..."

"That's a fine idea if I ever heard one!" exclaimed Fyodor. "Let's go."

We had always loved Fyodor for his decisiveness. And even so many years later, he was still the same. Tall and painfully thin, he strode rapidly along Marx Avenue in the direction of Gorky Street. We stopped in front of the National Hotel, and our corresponding member announced:

"I'll slip into the restaurant to buy a bottle of wine."

Fyodor knew how to get to the buffet via

the kitchen. He concealed himself in the shadow of a pitch black archway. And a few minutes later, we heard someone—probably a cook or a cleaning-man—shouting in his wake:

"You miserable drunks! Don't you get enough booze in the daytime?! Do you have to come sneaking through here? You know very well this place is off-limits!"

But his mission was fulfilled, and soon we were speeding all the way across town in a taxi to the clinic where Alexei Monin worked.

In the center of an enormous park stood the hospital where his clinic was located. We got out of the taxi at the gate to the park and walked along the wet asphalt path that led between rows of tall bushes and trees. A spring drizzle was falling, and the tiny new leaves trembled like fire-flies in the light of the electric street lamps. Migai talked loudly and with obvious inspiration about how he had had the great fortune to observe the tracks of K-mesons and the process of formation of resonance particles as well in a clean-type bubble chamber. Samozvantsev started bragging about his quantum generator, informing them that everything necessary for it could be bought at any drug store. Fyodor told them all they were still wet behind the ears, for they had nothing that could compare with his absolutely remarkable computer which had beat him at chess the day before. We paused for a moment as two male attendants crossed the path carrying a stretcher covered with a sheet.

"That fellow could probably care less

about our generators and resonance particles," sighed Migai. "That's probably the morgue over there..."

We all glanced at a low building with columns. The bas-relief that stood out clearly on the gray pediment depicted the Roman soldiers battling the Gauls.

"It's certainly humiliating to wind up at that establishment in the end," noted Leonid.

We walked to the neurosurgery clinic in silence.

Alexei Monin greeted us with obvious confusion and embarrassment. His lab coat was unbuttoned, and he was twirling a stubby pencil in his fingers, which made it awkward for him to shake hands with us.

"Listen, you've become a real doctor if I ever saw one—or some kind of medicine man, at least," burst out Migai.

Such a clarification was totally out of place, because at the juncture of the two sciences—medicine and physics—the title "doctor" sounded quite ambiguous. Alexei was utterly confused by this remark. We walked down the darkened corridor with him, and he whispered:

"This way, boys, this way. Now upstairs and turn right..."

"We shouldn't talk loud here," Fyodor announced didactically to Migai with his imposing bass.

In a small office lit only by a table lamp, we seated ourselves around Alexei's desk. Fyodor pulled two bottles of dry white Georgian wine from his pockets and placed them

ceremoniously before the still-confused Monin.

"You wretched devils!" he exclaimed. "Did you pilfer it from the 'students' party'?"

"Precisely. We started talking about Faraday and remembered you. Why have you gone into hiding?"

"Nothing of the kind. Wait a minute..."

Alexei stepped into the corridor, and we began hastily to examine the office of the physician on duty. There was nothing special about it. Cabinets stuffed with folders and documents—medical histories, most likely—lined the walls. A piece of equipment stood to one side of the cabinets, and by the wash basin stood a little table with glass jars of various sizes and functions. Then there was the desk.

Fyodor took a booklet from the desk and read in a whisper:

"*Electrically Induced Sleep.* It seems physics has made its way even into a place like this."

"I wouldn't want to try to do physics in a place like this..." Samozvantsev mumbled indefinitely. "A physicist with a morgue right next door. It doesn't quite fit somehow."

"Perhaps physics will one day have its role to play in the closing down of that totally unprofitable organization."

Alexei had entered noiselessly, carrying an armful of test tubes of various sizes.

"This is one time the size of the vessels doesn't matter," said our corresponding member. "The gradations are all marked precisely."

The wine was poured out in equal portions.

"Here's for twenty-five years of friendship..."

"For twenty-five years..."

Then we drank to each other's health—that had become almost a necessity these days.

"So tell us what you do here."

Alexei shrugged his shoulders.

"A little bit of everything. I work with the patients a lot..."

"So you've already learned how to treat them..."

"Of course not. Under no circumstances! I work in diagnostics..."

"And precisely what does that mean?"

"That means I help the neurosurgeons."

"Do they do brain operations here, or what?"

"Sometimes. But usually, the operations have something to do with traumas to the nervous system."

"Is it interesting work?"

"Sometimes..."

"And do you get to do any research?"

"Every one of our patients is a subject for research."

"I love to listen to stories about interesting cases! Tell us a story, Alexei. Something really outrageous!"

Migai took another sip of wine and moved his chair closer to the desk. Alexei set right his wire-rimmed glasses with jerky, nervous movements of his hands.

"What interests me most is amnesia induced by various illnesses."

"What do you mean, 'amnesia'?"

"In some cases, I mean total loss of memory, and in others, partial."

"Not long ago, I read a work by MacCullough called *Robot With No Memory*," said Fyodor.

"I read it, too, and it's a lot of nonsense. The results MacCullough obtained based on mathematical logic are totally inapplicable to people suffering from loss of memory. Their behavior is much more complex..."

"I have always wondered where it is located—memory, I mean," said Fyodor.

Alexei suddenly got much livelier:

"That's a very good question—where precisely is it located? After all, we can say with absolute certainty that there is no special center of the brain connected with memory."

"Perhaps it is located in some molecules or other..."

"That's not terribly likely," noted Alexei. "Memory is much too complex to be encoded on the molecular level. As a result of constant metabolic action, molecules are always in the process of renewal..."

We all thought for a bit. Whenever we talked with Monin, things that had always seemed so simple suddenly became monstrously complex and confused.

"What's this piece of equipment here?" asked Migai, taking the dust cover from the rectangular box on the small table.

"It's an out-dated electroencephalograph."

"You mean for recording brain waves?"

"Yes. This particular one has only eight channels. The newer ones are much better."

Alexei opened his desk drawer and pulled out a thick file.

"These are encephalograms of people suffering from amnesia..."

He showed us wavy graphs with lines which were almost purely sinusoidal in form.

"And now have a look at the biotics of the normally functioning human brain."

"Wonderful! So with the help of your little organ grinder over there, you can determine at once whether or not a person has a memory..."

"Yes. That's right."

"What?"

"Well, I don't consider the term 'biotics of the brain' to be correct, strictly speaking."

"What's the problem?"

"After all, we are not reading biocurrents directly from the brain. It is shielded first by the skull, then by a layer of tissue rich in blood vessels, and finally, by the skin..."

"But the frequencies are low..."

"All the same, I've done the calculations. If we take into consideration the conductivity of the shielding, we can get some idea of the enormous potential the brain actually does contain. These results haven't been confirmed in experiments with animals, by the way..."

We drank a bit more.

"Then what the hell does an encephalogram represent?"

"The encephalogram is really a measure of the biocurrents of the tissue against which we place the electrodes."

"Hmmm... But after all, it's been proven that these curves are somehow connected with brain functions. For example, with memory, like you were saying just now..."

"Well, so what? Are you trying to tell me the brain functions independently?"

"So you want to say that memory..."

Alexei smiled and rose.

"If you'd like, I can take a reading of the biotics of all your heads."

Fyodor Yegoryev scratched the back of his head and glanced at each of us:

"Well, fellows, shall we take the risk?"

We all did, of course, and amazingly enough, we felt rather awkward. It was as if we were paying a visit to a doctor we couldn't conceal anything from.

Migai was the first to sit down in the chair. Alexei affixed eight electrodes to his head and switched on the machine. The roll of paper turned slowly, but the pens remained motionless.

"Look at that—his brain's not functioning at all!" commented Samozvantsev.

"The machine hasn't warmed up yet."

We all started when the silence was unexpectedly broken by the loud scraping of the sharp metal on the paper. We stared at the slowly turning roll. The eight pens jumped up and down like madmen furiously waving their arms, scratching out whimsical lines.

"*Cogito, ergo sum*," Migai declaimed with a sigh of relief. "Now let's check out our dear corresponding member's brain. That will surely provide some extremely important data

for the academic council of our institute, especially since he is the chairman."

We were terribly surprised when we learned that the corresponding member's biotics was exactly like that of Migai, Samozvantsev, and myself. If there was any difference at all, it was not perceptible to us. We stared inquiringly at Alexei who smiled at us mysteriously.

"Well, my friends, I am pleased to announce that your encephalograms are identical because you are all, so to speak, at an identical level of intoxication. The encephalograms of drunken men are exactly like those of schizophrenics or epileptics just before a seizure..."

We all felt awkward, so we drank a bit more. Monin put our inebriated encephalograms aside and showed us a few more from his collection.

"This person is asleep, for example. And this is typical wakefulness. You can see theta and gamma waves on top of the basic alpha rhythm..."

"That's interesting," Fyodor said pensively. "And so where, in your opinion, is the human memory located?"

Alexei nervously stuffed the folder back into the desk drawer. Then he sat down and gazed at each of us in turn.

"Don't try to play dumb, Faraday. We can tell you know something. So please enlighten us as to the location of the human memory..."

Migai rose and playfully grabbed Alexei by the flap of his lab coat. Underneath it, we could see an old worn jacket.

"Well, if you insist..."

"That's a fine kettle of fish, 'if we insist'. We demand an answer, and nothing less. We must know where it is that we store our precious erudition!"

Migai had never been known for his tact. His thinking was always idiotically logical and disgustingly straightforward. When he said that, it seemed to me that I saw malevolent sparks flash in Monin's eyes. He pursed his lips tightly, rose from the desk, and walked over to one of the cabinets. He returned with an ordinary human skull in his hands—the kind that can be found in the biology lab of any school. Without saying a word, he placed the skull next to his machine and started to put the electrodes on it. We were so shocked we froze to the spot.

When all the electrodes were in place, Alexei stared at us through the darkness, then switched on the machine.

The eight pens jumped simultaneously, piercing the silence with the sound of scratching. We stared hypnotically into the empty eye sockets, and the machine feverishly recorded the crooked lines representing the biotics of a wakeful human being.

"That's what I think..." Monin said didactically.

We rose and hurriedly said goobye, afraid we might glance inadvertently at the table next to the electroencephalograph.

We got lost in the darkness and wandered for a long time through the high, wet grass. Giving the low, dark buildings wide berth, we walked by the fence which ran along the

damp, dimly-lit street. The prickly branches of dogroses grabbed at our coats and scratched disgustingly across the cloth. When at last we passed through the gates and paused to catch our breath, our corresponding member, Fyodor Yegoryev, said:

"That was just interference. Of course, it was nothing but interference from the line-operated current..."

With that convenient, comforting thought, each of us made his way home.

GENNADY GOR

THE BOY

1

Gherman Ivanovich came into the classroom carrying a pile of our exercise-books. Picking one up he said in his usual quiet, tired voice:

"Provided Gromov has no objections, I intend to read his composition aloud. It is worthy of our attention."

And he began to read. He read well and we at once realized that the story, about a boy lost in the cold expanses of the Universe, was unusual to say the least. The boy didn't know he was lost. For him it had all begun there, on board the moving spaceship and he had begun there too. It is not often that man thinks about his beginning. For him there is no beginning as, in effect, there is no end.

The boy had been born en route among the stars, and the spaceship, a replica in miniature

of the planet they had left behind them and which the grown-ups, his mother, father and their companions had been unable to get used to though they had been living in it for ten years, was for him as normal and as much part of his life as the school-yard was for us.

Somewhere in the infinite spaces of the Universe they had left behind forests smelling of pine needles warmed by the sun and pure fresh air, blue rivers, houses, and long roads humming with traffic. The boy had seen all these things of the screen but for him they were figments of a dream. How could he be sure indeed they were real?

His travelling companions were nothing if not persistent in their attempts to prove to him they were real and the person who was best at doing this was the dreamer-musician. Listening to his music, the boy felt the forests and rivers, houses and roads on the distant planet which the expedition had left long before his birth, spring to life. And then he would long to stretch out his hands and touch the flickering world on the screen which was so utterly different to life on board the spaceship, but even had his hands been able to extend millions of kilometres they couldn't have reached those forests and rivers, houses and roads which were all so far away.

That world did exist, however, as was confirmed by the music and the images on the screen. Its existence was also proved by learning: for the boy didn't just live on board the swiftly moving spaceship, he also did his lessons there.

Everyone helped the boy with his lessons: his parents and the rest of the grown-ups on the ship, including the always busy, always preoccupied commander. Information on the past was carefully stored and made available to the boy in generous quantities by the computers. But at times the boy felt he would willingly exchange all this information for a single hour spent in the forest or on the bank of a swift-flowing river. It was the music that told him about the river banks and the forest. The musician also felt nostalgic for home and made no attempt to hide it. And there was nothing wrong in this for he was a musician and a dreamer and his wistfulness rather than being a hindrance actually helped his companions to live and work.

The boy went on with his lessons. There was no one of his own age on board the spaceship and the only time he had ever seen other children was on the screen. He had no one to play with apart from the toy robot specially invented for him, but the robot wasn't much fun to play with: it was too serious and predictable.

Sometimes, feeling mischievous, the boy took to running about the ship (he could run because he had gravitational soles on his shoes), he would try to play hide-and-seek or tag and then the robot, looking worried would stump along behind him, holding its arms out: it was frightened, poor thing, the boy would bump into an instrument and bruise himself.

The boy never stopped wondering what children were like. He always hoped he might

perhaps see them in a dream. He never did, though. He only saw the robot though the robot, perhaps, did bear a certain resemblance to children and to the boy himself.

Though the boy used to ask the always kind and attentive grown-ups and the well-informed machines about children, no one was able to provide him with a sensible answer. Neither the grown-ups. Nor the machines. Nor the screen. Nor even the music. The children lived too far away, in a world where there were rivers, trees and clouds reflected in the water. The grown-ups most probably had forgotten that they too had once been children. Or it might well be they were reluctant to remind the boy of their childhood for it hadn't been spent on board a spaceship plunging through icy, black space.

Not that the boy often thought about the black space outside. The spaceship with its forbidden corners which the adults kept him out of promising each time to allow him in when he was older, represented a whole world for him.

When he was older. The word "older" had a mysterious ring to it which both frightened and thrilled the boy. For he was the only person on board the spaceship to whom it applied, everyone else having grown up long before their departure from the Earth.

He alone was growing and changing very quickly and everyone noticed this and it made them sad for it showed time was passing, a process that was even more relentless here on the spaceship than back home on their own

planet. The boy was changing but he had a lot more growing and changing to do before he became adult.

Where was the ship heading for and why? The boy had a sixth sense these were questions the adults didn't like answering and he therefore kept them to himself. It wasn't that such questions were prohibited but rather that the issues involved were unclear and controversial. The ship was to deliver the expedition to one of the planets in the vicinity of Big Star with the aim of finding out whether there were rational beings living there. While half of the crew thought there were, the other half had strong doubts on the matter. The boy also had his doubts, perhaps because his father was among the doubters. The boy loved his father more than anyone else in the world, more even than the musician, though he would have been unable to explain why he loved him. His father had a nervous tic which made his face twitch. But despite the tic, the boy was fond of his father's face.

A strange glow appeared at times in his father's eyes and the boy knew his father, unlike many of the others, was unable and had no wish to hide his longing to reach the planet in the vicinity of Big Star. The boy forgave his father his impatience because he guessed the reasons for it. The boy's father was a geologist and a large part of his life had been spent on board the spaceship where he could make use neither of his knowledge nor of his skills. For many years now his father had been eating his heart out for his work. The

boy's mother, a forestry expert, had also spent many a long year in anxious expectation. Evidently she was expecting to find vast, dense forests of unknown trees on the planet. Trees which had been waiting for centuries to be named and identified. It was more than likely, after all, that there were no rational beings on the planet.

It is quite odd when one thinks about it that almost everything has a name and that in order to give a name to what is nameless one has to travel millions and millions of kilometres and dozens of light years. The boy lived in a world of names: proper names and ordinary names. He had come to understand long ago that names helped his parents and their companions to communicate with each other and to relate to the objects surrounding them. The boy's imagination balked at the thought of a world without names. Even the emptiness beyond the walls of the spaceship had a name: it was called a void. And, as a result, it seemed to the boy to be just that much less empty and frightening.

Yes, the boy lived in a world of names. But among the human beings inhabiting the spaceship, he alone had virtually no need of a name. He was known, even by his mother and father, simply as the boy.

"Boy!" his companions would call.

"Boy!" the toy-robot would echo.

Of course, coming from an inanimate object this was something of a liberty. But the boy didn't take umbrage. For the robot, when all was said and done, wasn't responsible for its

language, uttering only those words it had been programmed to utter.

"Boy, what sort of a day have you had?" the grown-ups would ask.

And he couldn't help noticing that talking to him they would look brighter and less worried. Who knows why? Perhaps because, gazing at the boy, they were reminded of themselves at his age. Only the spaceship commander's face didn't change when he saw the boy: it remained just as stern and preoccupied as it always was. And the boy understood and approved his behaviour. The commander wouldn't allow thoughts of the past to relieve the strain of his present existence. Sparing others, he never spared himself and took his responsibilities very seriously.

The commander would go off to his own quarters, to consult his crew and his instruments. And then the boy's attention would switch to the objects around him or to the other people on board the spaceship. There was always something to interest him and he was, in effect, always occupied.

"Boy!" his companions would call.

Objects would also summon him, even those which were unable to speak or think.

And the boy would respond to their calls.

2

At this point in the story, Gherman Ivanovich stopped and laid down the exercise-book.

"And what happened next?" asked one of the pupils.

"Next," answered Gherman Ivanovich, his voice changing, "next there is a full stop and that's it. Let us hope Gromov will write a sequel. The story as it is remains unfinished!"

Gherman Ivanovich had become himself again, an elderly, weary teacher, while just a second ago he had been an artist helping us to identify with the strange world of the spaceship which had been flying for years into the unknown and the boy living on board it.

Looking towards Gromov sitting in the corner by the window, Gherman Ivanovich reminded us it was Gromov not him, who was the real artist.

And we were again made aware of Gromov's existence although, listening to the story, we had completely forgotten about him. Our attention had been rivetted by the boy and Gherman Ivanovich's voice to the exclusion of everything else. Now Gromov sat before us making out he had nothing whatsoever to do with the boy in the story. He gave us a guarded look as if expecting someone to pick on him. But, cross my heart, we none of us had any intention of turning on him though, if the truth be told, he had stuck his neck out writing such a strange essay.

What had come over him? We none of us knew nor had we any way of guessing. It was odd too that rather than writing about himself and his friends as we all did, he had chosen to write about a strange boy from another planet.

Silence having been re-established, Gromov most probably felt awkward and, as a result,

so did the rest of us, Gherman Ivanovich included. Gromov continued to sit in the corner by the window but he seemed to be a long way away, millions of kilometres separated him and his strange boy from us.

For anyone else it would have been alright, but Gromov shouldn't have written about that boy. He was the son of a famous archaeologist and we all knew this. We knew too that several years ago Gromov's father had made a major discovery: he had found some mysterious objects which had given rise to a dispute. In the evening paper and in two or three other journals there had been articles implying that Gromov's father had found evidence of extraterrestrials on our planet. But after this, for some reason, the press had kept silent on the subject, in the same way as it had suddenly shut up about the abominable snowman about which, at first, so much had been written. And at school there was a rumour that none of the stories about the extraterrestrials or even about the abominable snowman had been substantiated which was a shame for by now we all believed in the abominable snowman and were sad to have to part with him.

None of us had fancied being in Gromov's shoes when the press suddenly stopped writing about his father's archaeological discoveries. And realizing Gromov was not in any way to blame, we tried to keep off the subject of archaeology. Nor indeed was Gromov's father to blame for the fact that some journalist had been in too much of a hurry to pro-

claim his finds to the world, although it was more sensible to wait until they would be confirmed by science.

Gromov, of course, suffered on this account and kept himself aloof from the rest of us, always returning home alone and inviting none of the other kids, apart from Vlasov and me, to his house. But Vlasov was a timid person whose shyness gave him a perpetual stammer, while not to invite me would have put Gromov in an awkward position. I lived opposite him and had once broken one of the windows in his flat—though this had occurred before his father had made his sensational discoveries, Gromov would naturally be afraid that if he didn't invite me I would think it was because of the broken window-pane. The pane, as thick as the glass in a shop window, had been expensive to mend.

If one doesn't count Vlasov whose shyness prevented him taking in the contents of a strange flat, I was the only person in our whole class who was well acquainted with Gromov's home. He lived in a big, old flat which had an odd smell that neither I nor Vlasov could identify. Several yellow and brown skulls with numbers written on them stuck out from on top of a cupboard and hanging on the wall was a wooden god with cruel eyes that goggled at all visitors to the flat and which were made, so Gromov informed me, out of obsidian or volcanic glass.

Neither Vlasov nor I had ever been invited by Gromov or his father into the study. And each time I went to see Gromov I would stare

at the study door overcome by curiosity. In there, I would think to myself, there must be all sorts of weird things, perhaps even those very objects that have aroused such fierce discussion among archaeologists. To tell the truth, I was very disappointed the journalists had suddenly stopped writing about these finds. For some reason, I desperately wanted Gromov's father to be right and his opponents crushed. The other kids accused me of being conceited, of valuing my vanity above love of the truth, for, when all was said and done, I was Gromov's friend. But this was not so, I had a deep respect for the truth but I desperately wanted it to be both unusual and interesting. The world as it was, was too full of boring, second-rate truths.

And then Gromov suddenly stopped inviting me or even Vlasov home. And when we asked why (it was I, needless to say, who did the asking while Vlasov just stood by blinking shyly), Gromov said:

"You see, we are doing up the flat."

"Will it take a long time?"

Giving first Vlasov and then me an odd look, Gromov muttered something that was barely audible. And neither I nor even bashful Vlasov liked his answer.

"A very long time," he said. "We are having major repairs done."

He politely gave us to understand there was no point in us visiting him. I decided it was because of the broken window-pane and felt hurt. Vlasov, however, put forward a more sensible explanation.

"It's most probably Gromov's father who has put his foot down," he said. "That flat is full of weird and extremely valuable objects."

"But it is not as if we intend to steal them!"

"That's not the point. Gromov's father needs peace and quiet for his work. And there may well be other, even more important reasons."

Taken aback, I stared at Vlasov. He must have been very fond of Gromov not to have got hurt feelings and to stick up for his father.

Vlasov's theory that there were important reasons for us not being invited to the flat almost convinced me. Certainly, on giving the matter consideration, this appeared a plausible explanation. It was obvious that since Gromov's father was investigating objects that had aroused doubt among his colleagues, his work had to be kept out of the public eye. I even came to like the idea.

In short, I came close to adopting Vlasov's point of view. I forgot about the broken window-pane and decided it was more than likely that everyone else had forgotten about it too. Once in the park where we were kicking a ball around, I asked Gromov:

"Well, how is the decoration going?"

"It's progressing, slowly."

To tell the truth, I hadn't expected any other answer. Only three months had passed since the last time I had seen the numbered skulls, the door into the mysterious den and the obsidian eyes of the wooden god hanging on the wall. I longed to visit Gromov again, though I knew for the moment this was out

of the question. I would have to be patient.

I believe I have already mentioned that my classmates were fond of discussing the truth. And one of them, Mishka Drovodelov, would often repeat the following saying he had read somewhere.

"Plato," he would say coming up to me or Vlasov with a self-important air, "Plato, you're my friend, but the truth means more to me."

Drovodelov carried this off rather well, but I knew better than anyone how little the truth meant to him. Had he been as fond of the truth as he made out why did he get such low marks?

To me, cross my heart, the truth really meant a lot. I was convinced archaeologist Gromov and because of him his son to a certain extent were deeply involved with the truth. They were taking their time though. Wary of incurring criticism from other archaeologists they were going over their arguments with a toothcomb in order to make them watertight.

It was at about this time that Gromov wrote his essay on a free theme about the boy.

Still gripped by the story, the class sat in silence. As did Gromov. The room was unusually quiet and the silence weighed on us; it was like waiting for something one knows can never come true. The story about the boy had been broken off in the most exciting place...

The bell rang and everyone stirred. Sudden-

ly Drovodelov jumped up and approaching Gromov, his eyes starting out of his head, he shouted loudly:

"Gromov, you're my friend, but the truth means more to me!"

I was sure that now the story about the boy would never be finished. That idiot, Drovodelov, had spoilt everything. And, as I had thought, the story never was finished, though I was lucky enough to hear the next instalment. True, this wasn't to be till after the summer holidays.

3

I didn't manage to see Gromov at all during the holidays. He went to Komarovo, to the Academy of Sciences' summer camp, while I went to Molodezhnoye, to the camp run by the factory where my father worked. Of course, I could have bumped into Gromov by chance: Molodezhnoye wasn't so far away from Komarovo. But the whole summer, I didn't meet any of my classmates with the exception of Drovodelov who had ended up in the same camp as I had. His mother worked as housekeeper and though he lived not with us but with her in the wing for the camp staff, we saw each other every day.

On the very morning I arrived at the camp, he came running up, muttering with a self-important air:

"Plato, you're my friend, but the truth..."

Not being able to restrain myself, I seized

him by the collar of his shirt and said in a threatening tone:

"Mention Plato and the truth to me again and I'll give you a lesson you won't forget even if I get chucked out of the camp for it!"

He had obviously forgotten the effect his words had had on Gromov and the rest of us after Gherman Ivanovich had finished reading us the story about the boy.

Drovodelov was deeply hurt. Tears even appeared in his eyes and he said:

"Let me go! To begin with it was Socrates, not me, who said that. And he was a famous thinker. Let me go! You're in a summer camp, remember!"

"OK, I will this time," I answered, "but I don't want to hear another word about the truth."

And this seemed to bring Drovodelov to his senses for he stopped talking about the truth and Plato. He didn't forgive me for threatening him, though. I saw this written all over his mother's face every time I bumped into her: it waxed eloquent about the truth, Plato and the fact I'd almost torn the collar off her son's shirt. Her large and rather plump face was, incidentally, quite pleasant though too many feelings were expressed on it.

Drovodelov was never to refer to the truth again. And one had to be grateful for this. I've long been aware that when someone who is not particularly bright quotes a wise man's words they are apt to sound dull though the

speaker hasn't added anything of his own. Why this is so, I've no idea. But enough of Drovodelov. Everyone in the camp was fed up to the backteeth with him: he never stopped arguing, begging for things or spreading gossip about the team against which he was playing. As a result, he was dropped from the team and instead of realizing it was his fault, he immediately began to blame me.

"Not very friendly behaviour for a classmate if you ask me," he whined.

His words for some reason made me feel sorry for him and I asked the other kids not to ditch him.

Cross my heart though, I'm reluctant to discuss Drovodelov for he wasn't a particularly engaging character. But it so happens we can't get by without him. On the day I'm about to describe to you, he came up to me and, slapping me on the shoulder, said:

"I went into town yesterday with Mum."

"So what?"

"Got some news for you!"

"What?"

"Gromov's changing schools."

"Why?"

"They're moving to a new flat. He's hardly likely to come all the way to Vasilevsky Island from Chernaya Rechka."

"Surely he is not going to leave our class just because of a flat," I said, feeling, however, my argument wasn't a hundred percent convincing.

Drovodelov stared at me, his face suddenly looking remarkably like his mother's.

"Are you suggesting he should prefer you to his new flat?"

"If the Gromovs were intending to move, why start repair works?"

"So you don't believe me then?"

"No, I don't."

"Surely you know I always speak the truth?"

Drovodelov looked on himself as being a pillar of truthfulness. Transferring to our school the year before last from somewhere in Baburino, he boasted to everyone his mother was Leningrad's leading engineer and that she worked at the Kirov Steel Plant in the steam turbine workshop. It later became known that in winter she sold beer at a street kiosk and in summer worked as housekeeper at summer camps. We all got to hear of this, but in order not to embarrass Drovodelov every time the conversation turned to steam turbines, we would quickly start talking about something else. And bashful Vlasov even suggested that Drovodelov's mother had at one time been an engineer but, having turned out to be rather a bad one, she had changed jobs.

But enough of Drovodelov's mother!

The news about Gromov upset me a lot. It is a well-known fact that on the whole we schoolchildren lead a boring life. Interesting people with a mysterious past or present are more likely to be met with in books than at school. And Gromov had long attracted my attention not just because of his father's discoveries, but as a character in his own right: he was nothing if not independent.

Were I asked to describe Gromov's looks

and character I'd find it difficult. His appearance couldn't have been more ordinary if one doesn't count the grey strands of hair over his left ear. Gromov had gone grey at birth, long before he has learnt what it was to be worried or upset. The grey lock and his glasses in a green frame gave Gromov's face a serious and even imposing expression. One of the kids bestowed on him the nickname of Academician, but it didn't stick. Nothing stuck to Gromov: neither dirt nor dust nor envious and unkind words. To some extent he resembled the boy he had written about and as Gherman Ivanovich read out his essay I imagined to myself a boy with a grey lock over his left ear, like Gromov had, though there was no mention of this in the story. I have long been aware that reading a story or a poem one always seeks for a resemblance between the hero and someone one knows. I remember reading Pushkin's *Evgeny Onegin* for the first time and immediately realizing whom Evgeny reminded me of: he was the spitting image of a well-dressed young man I had once seen on the Nevsky Prospekt by the Sever Café. Wearing a narrow pair of trousers he stood, one leg poised in front of the other, and it was written all over his face he was dead bored and didn't know how to occupy himself.

Yes, I'm convinced now there was a similarity between Gromov and the boy born on board the spaceship. It wasn't just a matter of the grey lock, but that Gromov knew a great deal: more than anyone else at school. He never came top of the class, however, for

his knowledge was entirely unrelated to the school curriculum. Somewhere, for instance, he'd learnt, and in great detail what is more, about the brain of the plesiosaur, a prehistoric monster which had died out millions of years ago. Even our biology teacher, Ivan Stepanovich, didn't know this. But we could see little point to knowledge that wasn't in textbooks or the school curriculum. Our teachers, with the exception of Gherman Ivanovich, weren't particularly impressed by it. It would be wrong to jump to the conclusion though they only appreciated the information contained in textbooks. They were experienced people and realized full well that to know the size of a plesiosaur's brain wouldn't be of much use to Gromov in the future and that it was more important to have a good knowledge of the things one comes into contact with at every turn. It was highly unlikely, after all, Gromov would ever (and the same goes for us and indeed you) come across a plesiosaur.

I once blurted this out to Gromov in the presence of Vlasov and Drovodelov who, as usual, was hanging around when he wasn't wanted. Drovodelov with his usual lack of tact, burst out laughing while Gromov gave me a mocking look: without saying a word he got a newspaper cutting out of his school satchel and handed it to us. We read it and were goggle-eyed with surprise. The article said that a few days ago a plesiosaur had been found alive in a Scottish loch.

At our biology lesson we showed the cut-

ting to Ivan Stepanovich who, for some reason, was very put out. The discovery obviously didn't please him and at the end of the lesson he said:

"That doesn't add anything to our knowledge."

And then, after some thought, he added:

"Though it doesn't necessarily detract from it either." At the time, his words appeared to us no less mysterious than the discovery of the Loch Ness monster itself.

But enough about the plesiosaur-monster which, as it is, everyone has heard about. There is no denying though Gromov knew a great deal of which there wasn't so much as a hint in our textbooks. He knew more about water, for instance, than any one of us. And it is more than probable that his knowledge about ice would have stumped even our chemistry teacher, Vera Nikolaevna. Once during our chemistry lesson he told us ice was not, as many people thought, a solid.

"What is it then?" we asked.

"Solids are composed of atoms arranged in an ordered structure, a crystal lattice, if you like."

Remembering the pane of glass and that it was so thick it had to be cut by a diamond cutter, I set Gromov a trick question.

"What about glass?" I asked, "Is it a solid, or not?"

"It's not," Gromov answered, "glass is supercooled liquid of a high viscosity."

Vera Nikolaevna didn't take part in the conversation. On the subject of chemistry

and physics it was wiser to steer clear of Gromov. No one knew where he picked up his information and to check up on it was difficult.

Our top pupils were also well informed, they frequented various hobby groups at the Palace of Pioneers and kept abreast of the latest discoveries. But to make use of Ivan Stepanovich's favourite expression this knowledge neither added to nor detracted from their image. Gromov was another matter. His knowledge transformed him. I'll try and explain what I mean by this. So long as Gromov remained silent he was an ordinary schoolboy like the rest of us. But he only had to open his mouth and he became a completely different person: much more intelligent and imposing than the ordinary schoolboy and one got the impression this was his real self which up to then he had been concealing.

Answering a question from a teacher, Gromov never hurried like other top pupils were wont to do. On the contrary, he took his time as if not sure of the correct answer and silently consulting someone inside him.

What else can I say about Gromov? Nothing, probably, for the moment. When he moves to Chernaya Rechka and to another school, it may well be I'll have more to say. For when a chap sits every day with you in the same classroom with his grey lock and dimpled chin and when you watch him day in day out writing with a squeaky piece of chalk on the blackboard or reading the latest number of *Knowledge Is Power*, it is difficult

to come up with anything of enormous interest. But perhaps Gromov won't move to Chernaya Rechka and, indeed, Drovodelov may well have made the whole story up in his longing to be the purveyor of news.

4

When term began and I entered the classroom I was half expecting not to see Gromov. But he was sitting quietly in his place by the window, reading a book in order not to waste time.

I said hello and then, my curiosity getting the better of me, I suddenly asked:

"Well, what about the boy? Will there be more about him?"

I expected Gromov to ignore my question, but he answered me and it seemed willingly:

"My exercise-book is with Gherman Ivanovich. During the summer I managed to find some additional information on him."

"But the boy doesn't exist, you made him up, it's a story, a fairy-tale, you've written..."

Looking at me, Gromov said:

"Are you sure?"

"Why do you ask? Aren't you sure?"

He gave an ironic smile and uttered the following words whose true meaning I couldn't for the life of me understand.

"It is not a question of being sure. It's all much more complicated than that."

I wanted to put another question to Gromov, but didn't manage to. Drovodelov ap-

peared and sat down beside us. And I was reluctant to speak about the boy in front of him. For he would have certainly interfered and started to ask questions: he was forever poking his nose into other people's business.

"I've got a piece of news for you," Drovodelov said in a low voice, leaning towards me so Gromov wouldn't hear. "After lessons are over, Gherman Ivanovich is going to read the next part of the story about the boy. Absolute drivel, isn't it? A load of old rubbish. Do we really have to listen to such drivel?"

He spoke in a very low voice, but even so I was afraid Gromov, who by this time had picked up his book again, would hear.

Drovodelov was right. The lessons having come to an end, Gherman Ivanovich read us the next instalment of the story. This time he didn't read nearly as well.

The spaceship was continuing on its way. Having passed his exams, the boy was spending his holidays—and indeed there was nowhere else he could possibly spend them on board the ship. Whether they were the summer or winter holidays was of no consequence, for on board a spaceship there is neither summer nor winter. Who examined the boy? Anyone who felt like it, from the commander of the spaceship right down to the chemist-cum-cook. And the most faultfinding and severe examiners of all were the computers. One of the computers set the boy a trick question.

"Tell us boy," it said in a male voice, "in what year was the wheel invented?"

The boy was taken aback. He went over all

the dates for major discoveries and inventions in his mind but couldn't remember anything about the wheel.

The computer waited a long time for his answer and then it said this time for some reason in a female voice:

"Don't worry, no one knows the answer to that, not even I do. The wheel was invented long before the inhabitants of our planet started to date things."

It was certainly unfair of the computer to set the boy a question to which there wasn't an answer and what is more, change its voice. For the boy was frightened enough as it was. He answered all the rest of the questions without a moment's hesitation.

The holidays started and the boy immediately forgot all about the trick question. He was the happiest person on board the ship for he had been born on it and had only heard about any other way of life at secondhand. Unlike the rest he had no friends on the distant planet they had left behind them whom he longed to see. All his friends were with him on the ship. His present as well as his past was here; as for the future, one could only guess at it. The future depended on the theory of probability and on the unknown planet to which they were flying. There was a lot of talk about the planet on board the ship. It seemed everyone had their own mental picture of it. Some considered it was inhabited by highly intelligent, civilized beings, others that only reptiles lived on it. The boy had his own thoughts on the matter. He was con-

vinced the planet was populated by children. Deep down, he knew this was impossible, but he longed to see other children before he became grown-up.

Over the many years of its unbroken flight a special pattern of life had been established on board the spaceship and this made it easier for all members of the expedition and crew to adapt themselves to existence on board so that they almost succeeded in forgetting that only the walls of the ship separated them from the cold and terrifying void outside.

The boy learnt that the pattern too had a name of its own: it was called a routine. However much thought he gave the matter, he couldn't for the life of him understand the true meaning of this word, though he had no difficulty at all in understanding other words. He felt there was something unusually important and mysterious about it. Could it be that as soon as they'd boarded the spaceship, the grown-ups had agreed among themselves not to think about the void outside and then this pattern had come into being which distracted them from disturbing thoughts in the same way that dreams or work do.

Virtually all professions were represented on the spaceship. There was even a philosopher on board. He gave deep thought to what was going on and with the help of his mind put it in some form of order.

Once, bumping into the philosopher in the logical machine division, the boy plucked up his courage and asked him what the word routine meant.

The philosopher smiled at him kindly.

"Routine," he said, "is a chain of habits which, in effect, we don't notice as we don't notice our clothes once we have put them on. But were we to take them off and go out into the cold..."

The philosopher suddenly fell silent, remembering he was talking to a boy, not to a grown-up.

He smiled again and went off. The boy didn't ask any other questions on the subject and tried to think no more of it. He guessed routine was something that only existed for grown-ups and that children didn't and, indeed, couldn't, know what it was. And, certainly, everything appeared to the boy to be new and exciting even what he had seen many times over.

He noticed how everyone around him was hard at work, doing calculations, inventing things or studying. Entering a laboratory, he was always given a warm welcome, particularly, for some reason, when research was underway into very complex phenomena as, for instance, in the submolecular biology lab. Perhaps this was because the researchers, engrossed in their investigations and working with very complex instruments, would lose touch for hours on end with the world around them and, seeing the boy would bring them back to reality.

When the boy left, silence would descend again in the laboratory. But they all knew he wasn't far away for though the spaceship was a large one everything on it was relatively

close at hand. And leaving the lab the boy would be totally engrossed in the submolecular world and his thoughts would now carry him not into the vast spaces of the Universe which lay outside the ship, but into the world of infinitely small particles. And he would start to imagine himself as being infinitely large, consisting of a multitude of worlds.

In their free time, some members of the expedition would play chess. Looking at the board over one of the player's shoulders, the boy liked to guess what the next move would be. The weakest player was the musician. He always lost whether he played against computers or live partners. Though this grieved him a lot, he had a passion for chess. His frequent defeats annoyed the boy.

Having lost a game, the musician would go off to his own quarters and compose music. Once he beckoned to the boy and leading him to his cabin switched on the record player so the boy could hear one of his new tunes. The boy listened to the clear, radiant, flowing music. That was the sound of little pieces of ice knocking against each other; then came the sound of water, first gurgling, then roaring as if it dashed over the boulders.

And gradually the boy visualized the faraway planet he had never seen with its multitude of rivers and streams. The song sung by water was extraordinary.

And he suddenly realized that though the song existed there were neither ears nor brains to listen to and appreciate it. For the planet was not yet inhabited by rational beings...

The planet, that is, that was described in the music.

The clear, radiant sounds went on flowing round him. And the melody was so beautiful and lucid it seemed to the boy that the rivers, streams, torrents and little pieces of ice were right there beside him.

Then the music came to an end. Neither the composer nor the boy uttered a word. But the boy couldn't keep silent for long.

"Go on with the story, please," he begged the musician.

"What story?"

"The same one as before," the boy said in a low voice.

And the musician began to tell him about the planet on which he had been born and spent his youth. Though he was a good musician, he made a poor story-teller often losing the thread of the narrative and repeating himself.

He had been born in a forest at the foot of a mountain on top of which there was a lake. His father had been a warden at a nature reserve and a winding path had led right from the doors of their cottage deep into the forest where it petered out.

But apart from paths, trees and mountains with lakes on top of them there was also something else called necessity. When the musician-to-be grew up, he had to part with all this including the mountain-top lake. Flashing along the road at the speed of lightning, a car took him into town. Town life was also fun though there was no mountain there with a

lake at its summit. Life had deprived the musician-to-be of all these things. He didn't despair, however, for he had already guessed that life was made up not only of acquisitions, but also of losses.

"What did you acquire?" the boy asked.

"Experience."

"But you gave up the mountain and the lake for it."

"Perhaps one day I'll return to the mountain," the musician said wistfully.

"When?"

"I don't know. We've still got to reach our destination, then the journey home will take a good many years. Life is very short after all..."

The musician suddenly fell silent and he looked sad. He was the most carefree person on board the spaceship but now he looked just like the others. And the thought suddenly occurred to the boy that the distance the spaceship had to cover was measured not in terms of space or time, but of life itself. And the thought was a perturbing one... The years were slipping by and if the musician was ever to see the mountain of his childhood again, it would only be as an old man. It might well be, indeed, he wouldn't live long enough.

Wanting to say something pleasant to the musician and to relieve his homesickness the boy said:

"Even if you never see the lake again perhaps I will and I'll pass on your regards."

There was a pause. Both the grown-up and the boy felt awkward. Then the boy realized

the musician had kept something back. He'd left out the most important thing which was probably just as well. For the boy knew the woman the musician loved had gone off with someone else. And even if she were to regret her action there was no way of putting the matter to rights—for the musician was now too far away from her and when and if he did return home it would be as an old man.

There was only one very elderly person on board the ship, the chief computer operator and everyone realized he would never see his home again. He had a very robust constitution though and the cook-cum-chemist who didn't enjoy very good health, once said enviously that the old man would outlive them all even the boy and that if anyone was destined to return home it was him.

The boy would eye the old man furtively. They had something in common after all: the old man was the oldest and the boy the youngest of all those on board.

Had the old man ever been a child? It was quite possible he had and that he hadn't grown old straight away. Whenever he met the boy, he would look at him in surprise and say:

"Where have you sprung from, boy?"

Though the boy realized this was a joke he couldn't see the point of repeating the same joke over and over again. The old man would stare at the boy without a past. He'd lived such a long time he was a mine of facts and information and came close to rivalling the computer's memory. About two years ago,

indeed, the old man had caught one of the computers out in an inaccuracy and they would all laugh remembering the incident.

Looking at the old man the boy could visualize the past for the past was alive in him and in his eyes which gazed sternly at the world from under the grey eyebrows. Though it was stored in him as it was in the computers' memory, it remained silent, out of a sense of its own dignity. For the old man wasn't a computer ready to answer any frivolous question at the drop of a hat. And the old man's past was of an entirely different kind to the computers' memory. The computers remembered dates, facts and events. But apart from facts and events, the old man also remembered himself and other people he had known.

It was odd it should have been the old man the boy thought of on the night the void all but swallowed up the spaceship. But more about the void, the spaceship and the boy later.

"That's all," said Gherman Ivanovich in a deadpan voice and closed the exercise-book. "We'll have to wait for the next instalment."

No one uttered a word: even the top pupils and the show-offs who could never refrain from asking questions. With the exception, of course, of Drovodelov who, leaning towards me, said:

"Drivel. Utter drivel! It's even given me a headache. What's the point of that old man or the lake on top of the mountain? What's it up there for anyway?"

I also felt there was something wrong with the story. Getting carried away by computers and the old man, Gromov had lost track of the main thread of the narrative. He must be told.

5

Of course, Drovodelov wasn't right when he said the story about the boy was drivel and utterly boring. But I have to admit I liked the beginning better than the middle. I, and the others too incidentally, had been expecting the boy to do something really brave. We were to be disappointed. The story couldn't have been more ordinary and it progressed at a painfully slow pace, like before exams. Only towards the end did something happen though what exactly we didn't know. It appeared up to a certain point Drovodelov was right. And this was a mistake on Gromov's part for one mustn't give people like Drovodelov any opportunity of patting themselves on the back. But enough of Drovodelov. Particularly as later he was absent for a whole week having gone away with his mother to stay with some relations in Luga.

Gromov kept quiet and to all questions about the boy he gave the following brief reply:

"What have I to do with it? I never flew in that spaceship."

Dorofeev, the top pupil in our class, went up to him and asked him with a smile what was so remarkable about the boy.

Gromov answered:

"He is remarkable because he was born in space among the stars. Where were you born?"

"I was born at Otta Hospital, Vasilevsky Island."

"Well," asked Gromov, "is there any difference in your view between Otta Hospital and that point in space where the boy was born?"

Dorofeev shrugged his shoulders and said as far as he was concerned he didn't see there was an enormous difference. And having delivered this reply he gave us all a rather haughty look.

Gromov never put on airs not even when the papers had been full of his father's discoveries. After the press had stopped writing about them, though, his spirits had fallen a little. And we began to watch him carefully as if there was some sort of direct link between his behaviour and the fate of these discoveries, a link which had suddenly been broken off. In general there was a lot that remained unclear about the whole business.

But from the time Gromov started to write the story about the boy this link had suddenly been reestablished. Though slight and virtually invisible, it was none the less felt by almost everyone. There were people about, however, who wanted to get rid of it and this applied, in particular, to Drovodelov. Being the sort of person he was he found the link irritating. His fingers itched to get at everything that could be cut or broken off. Once he cut off a call-box telephone receiver and produced it in class.

"Did it get in your way?" we asked him.

"Not in the least," came the reply.

"Think of how much time people have wasted because of you."

"What do I care," he answered, "that's what time is for."

On his return from Luga Drovodelov took to his old tricks again. Anyone might have thought the story about the boy had caused a major interruption in his life. Entering the classroom, he would sit down and stretching out his long legs would inquire whether it was possible for a boy to be born in a spaceship and live there a great many years, flying into the unknown.

"As a hypothesis it is quite possible," we would tell him.

"OK, I'll grant you that," he agreed, "but tell me why there was a philosopher, an old man and a composer on board the ship? Surely they weren't necessary?"

"Of course, they weren't," we would say. "But they had their uses. One wrote music, the other evoked memories, while the third used his thinking power to fight against prejudice and superstition."

"Right," Drovodelov would reply, refusing to give in. "A composer, a philosopher, an old man and a boy who was also, as it happens, entirely unnecessary. Now let's calculate how much fuel, food, oxygen, medicine and other indispensable items would have been needed on board the ship. It had been flying, after all, for many years."

"But it may still be in space. We don't

know the end of the story yet..."

"That doesn't matter. Let's get to work."

And picking up pen and paper, he would begin to count. Of course, he expected us to join in. He was bad at maths and might easily make a mistake. But none of us were prepared to indulge in calculations of this sort in order to establish how much the boy ate, drank and breathed. As far as we were concerned, we were happy to let him eat, drink and breathe to his heart's content. Drovodelov, however, couldn't rest till he had found out and he would sit down with his pencil in order to do the necessary work.

We too started to do sums, though our calculations were of a very different kind... We were trying to work out how big the spaceship would have to be in order to carry all the items necessary for such a long journey. We plied Gromov with questions: asking him how many people and machines there were on board, whether the ship ran on photon or atomic power or whether it made use of anti-gravitational forces. Did the ship have to do with normal Einstein time, or with the zero-space of sci-fi literature?

We had fierce arguments on the subject of zero-space for, if the truth be told, none of us were sure what it was. Top pupil Dorofeev said it was a concept everyone apart from sci-fi writers was still in the dark about. So we began to pester Gromov on the subject. He explained to us there was no question of the ship moving in zero-space and that the boy lived in a completely real, three-dimensional

world and was moving virtually at the speed of light.

Now let's return to the link which Drovodelov was so determined to destroy. We all felt it. A strange connection which had nothing to do with the telephone, telegraph, radio or quantum mechanics, but stemmed, if you like, from the mind and linked us to the boy who was neither in the past nor the future, but somewhere, at an unknown point in the Universe.

I've read somewhere that communications are a field where there is a lot of room for further study. For instance, some scientists maintain there are psychic fields whose physical properties are still unknown. We were now deeply involved with the space boy who had become very much part of our life. In order to understand the environment in which the boy lived, we began to keep tabs on the latest discoveries in science and technology. We were literally feverish with excitement. And Leonid Starovertsev even started a card index system with a separate card for every discovery made. He usually carried the cards with him, stuffing them into his pockets and peering at them shortsightedly during lessons. There was a mass of information contained on those cards! There were cards on supernova stars, nucleic acids, on the highly intelligent dolphins, on the language spoken by the ancient Mayan people and on "social" insects such as bees and ants which communicate with each other solely via supersonic sound.

Starovertsev sat in front of me and by looking over his shoulder I was able to increase my knowledge.

"Have you anything on the abominable snowman?" I once asked him.

"No. I've left that card blank for the moment."

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm still waiting for science's verdict on the subject."

The cold tone with which these words were uttered gave me quite a turn. So the card which should contain details of Gromov's father's discoveries was also blank pending science's verdict on this very controversial issue.

6

Gromov turned up regularly for all classes. Presumably this meant his parents had put off moving to their new flat in Chernaya Rechka due to circumstances beyond their control. Perhaps the builders had fallen behind schedule or the commission whose job it was to pass the block of flats had been too pernickety declaring it unfit for human habitation having discovered a crack in the ceiling and rejecting at the same time the paintwork. As far as I was concerned, I had no quarrel with either the builders or the commission. I was loth to part with Gromov and to break off the link with the boy for good.

Gromov came and went. He sat in his usual

place by the window and when I wanted to look at him I pretended I was gazing out of it. It was a large window that let in plenty of light and outside in the street were trees and people walking along the pavements. Opposite was a house also with a window in which a fat old woman used to sit. She would eat plums, spitting the stones straight out on to the pavement. We saw her so often that anyone might have thought she lived in the window, not leaving it for a single second.

And looking at the window I thought about how the boy wouldn't have the slightest idea of what a window was (for how could there be windows in the tightly sealed sides of a spaceship?). To a certain extent the screen took the place of a window though, of course, it couldn't do so entirely. And I also thought what a wonderful thing the window was—it was as if the wall wasn't there and one could see far away into the distance as well as the sky, clouds, trees and the old woman eating plums. And I asked Starovertsev whether he didn't have anything in his file on windows, in what century, for instance, had the window been invented?

Somewhat disconcerted by my question, Starovertsev said he didn't have a card on the subject.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the window was invented many centuries ago and I only fill in cards for things relating to the future."

"Won't there be windows then in the future?"

"There will, but they'll be rather different. Out of a window, for instance, you will see not a hairdressers, say, or a shoe-makers shop, but part of the Universe. That's, probably, the sort of window there will be."

Though he listened to our conversation, Gromov didn't say anything. I could see the question of windows interested him but being a tactful person he didn't intervene. He had no need of a card index system or reference books to tell him in what century the first window aperture had been made in a wall.

It was an issue that caused me considerable worry, though I refrained from questioning Gromov on the subject. Also out of tact. Some people were irritated by Gromov's vast knowledge. The other kids thought Starovertsev was rather envious of Gromov and was hoping to catch him up with the help of his card index system. All the tables in his flat were piled high with boxes of cards as if he was a professor, reluctant to rely on encyclopaedias or even his own memory. But despite this, up till now Starovertsev hadn't managed to catch up with Gromov or, indeed, to come anywhere near equalling his knowledge. The other kids used to ask me and Vlasov whether there were boxes of cards in Gromov's flat too. But I hadn't seen a single card or box there, apart from a box in which Gromov's mother used to grow flowers in summer. And we all came to the conclusion that Gromov had an extraordinary memory.

I don't know whether it was because of his

memory or due to something else but whenever Gromov answered a teacher's questions the world took on a completely different shape: everything around us changed, we changed and our teacher did too. And it seemed to all of us there was an invisible wire linking Gromov up with the Moon, the atom, the bottom of the ocean, with the brain of the ant and the bee, and even with Napoleon and Aristotle. And it was as if Aristotle and Napoleon, the bees and the atom, the Moon and the bottom of the ocean were in direct communication with us, Gromov being their trusted representative.

Gromov only answered those questions addressed directly to him, he never jumped to his feet or held up his hand having no desire to show off how much more he knew than anyone else. Our teachers for some reason rarely questioned him, they were confused it seems by some of his answers, though they were also delighted by them. And the strangest thing of all about it was that Gromov had no more time at his disposal than the rest of us, nor did he give up a subject, whether gym, chess or anything else. Perhaps he slept less than we did and studied during the night in an effort to learn and remember as much as possible. I doubt it, though. For this would have displeased his parents and have been bad for his health. One of the kids in our class put forward the theory that the boy in the story was a real person and gave Gromov advice. Many thought the idea was ridiculous, but Starovertsev asked:

"How many millions of years has he been alive?"

The idea had its supporters. Top pupil Dorofeev suggested that perhaps Gromov's father had found a coded copy of the boy. Such copies had often been written about in sci-fi literature. In a word, Gromov was in contact not with the boy himself, but with his copy. The boy's inner world had been recorded in code and his double was in Gromov's flat though he, himself, had long ago ceased to exist submitting to the universal law of destruction.

The idea seemed to me to be very naive. And it would hardly have been ethical for Gromov's father to have kept the coded copy of the boy a secret from his colleagues and the public at large in order that his son excel at school. This was the first point going against the theory and there were many others. How could the coded copy of the boy have known, say, about Napoleon and much else of which there could have been no inkling on that distant planet. Though from the point of view of reason and logic there was not much going for the idea, emotion and the longing to witness and take part in unusual events won the day. Sometimes I would wonder, fully aware of how inconsistent I was being, whether perhaps Gromov's boy really did exist. Not literally, say, but as a coded copy. The copy might be kept, say, in Gromov's father's study and from time to time converse with Gromov on various scientific themes.

But we must leave the world of fantasy and

return to reality, a reality that couldn't be more ordinary. I had gone down with a sore throat and had been cooped up several days in bed. Starovertsev came to see me. Frightened of catching a germ, he sat in the far corner of the room which Mother and Father out of force of habit still referred to as the nursery. He sat looking through his cards occasionally making entries on them and appeared to have forgotten all about me.

"You could have done that at home or in the library," I said.

"Were I at home or in the library, I wouldn't be sitting here with you."

"Agreed," I replied, "but since you are sitting here with me, you might at least leave your cards in your pocket. Tear yourself away from them, even if only for a minute."

"I don't believe in wasting my time."

"Don't waste it then," I said, "it's your life."

"I'm not just working for myself, I'm working for other people too, you included."

"Couldn't you be a bit more specific? You're not, I take it, working for Drovodelov?"

"For Drovodelov? No," Starovertsev answered in a vague tone of voice. "You see Drovodelov cut off and brought to school..."

"Another telephone receiver?"

"No, a fox's tail this time. He says he cut it off a fox at the zoo. He's lying, of course. It smells of mothballs."

"Is that all the news?" I asked.

Starovertsev, for some reason, took offence. He turned pink and even dropped several cards on the floor in his agitation.

"I'm not the person to ask for news. I despise all that sort of thing deeply."

"Why?"

"News is gossip, as Academician Vernadsky said. It says so in his biography."

At this point he got so uptight he left, without even bothering to pick his cards up off the floor. I didn't feel I was to blame.

I got to my feet and gathered up the cards Starovertsev had dropped. One card was on the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, another on the ATF molecule and hydrogen bonds, a third—I couldn't believe it!—on the coded copy of the boy.

Top pupil, Dorofeev had been right.

The card contained a quote from a newspaper item about archaeologist Gromov's discoveries and there was a mention of a coded copy of a boy from outer space which had been lying in the earth ever since the Jurassic period.

As I read and reread the card, my hand began to shake. I got back into bed, turned on the light and read the card again. Two conflicting voices began to argue inside me. One said it was all nonsense and that Starovertsev had just written down what Dorofeev had said and had left the card behind on purpose in order to pull my leg. But the other voice maintained that Starovertsev took his card index system far too seriously to muck about with it. I was like an umpire

listening to the arguments put forward by the two voices and still not knowing which one I agreed with.

As the conflict proceeded, the two voices advancing hundreds of arguments each in support of their own point of view, one of the voices began to get the better of the other voice that argued rationally and logically like our maths teacher, Mark Semenovich did. I immediately thought of Mark Semenovich with a piece of chalk in one hand, a damp rag in the other, figures on the blackboard and his voice with its permanently doubting intonation, even when there was nothing to doubt in.

That voice, Mark Semenovich's voice, sat inside me and argued as follows:

"Let's assume," it said addressing itself to all and sundry, "let's assume it's not known whether or not the coded copy of the boy exists, we will give it the symbol X. We then ask ourselves for what reason the symbol Y, that is Starovertsev, hurried to fill in a card which he'd kept blank for so long. Let's assume that Starovertsev..."

The voice with the doubting intonation eventually convinced me which did not take a lot of doing. Starovertsev was not the sort of person to indulge in practical jokes. What could it mean? It presumably meant that while I'd been in bed, having my temperature taken and swallowing tablets, there had been a piece in the newspapers about the coded copy of the boy.

I called Mother who was in the dining-room

and asked her to bring me the papers.

"Today is Monday," Mother said, "and there was no paper delivery. And I used yesterday's paper to wrap up a pair of shoes I took to the menders."

7

I decided to take the bull by the horns and telephone Starovertsev himself. A deep, low man's voice answered.

"Starovertsev, please," I said.

"Starovertsev speaking," the voice replied.

In my excitement I didn't immediately realize it was Starovertsev's father who had picked up the telephone. I was taken aback to hear my friend speaking in such a low and unfamiliar voice.

"Starovertsev speaking," the voice repeated in an irritated tone.

"I'm sorry, it's not you, but your son I want to speak to."

"He was taken to hospital yesterday," the voice answered, "with appendicitis."

He hung up and I did too. It was dead quiet.

There appeared to be a conspiracy afoot to prevent me getting to the bottom of the mystery. I lay in bed, swallowed tablets, drank tea with lemon and waited for the doctor from the local medical centre.

The doctor arrived, a grumpy old woman, and started to complain about how badly our lift worked. The last time she had been to our flat on the sixth floor the door of the lift had

jammed with her inside it and she'd had to shout for help and had spent 40 minutes sitting in the lift until the emergency lift service man had arrived. Today, in order not to waste time, she'd decided against using the lift and had walked all the way up to the sixth floor. Complaining to my mother about the lift she asked her to produce a tea-spoon and me to open my mouth. Then she said I would have to stay in bed for at least another two days and left.

I lay in bed for two whole days and thought and thought. I thought about the coded copy of the boy which, if one was to believe Starovertsev's card index system, had been found by Gromov's father. Many millions of years had passed since the Jurassic period when the earth had been inhabited by reptiles. This meant the copy had been lying in the earth and waiting patiently all that time for rational beings to appear capable of understanding its language and entering into communication with it.

Wanting to know more about the Jurassic period, I asked Mother to bring me in a paleontology textbook which had belonged to my elder brother when he had been a student. Not being able to find it she gave me instead a book called *The Paleontology of Vertebrates*.

And from this book I learnt a strange fact which shook me, to put it mildly. It appeared in the Jurassic period there had been a dinosaur without teeth but with small forefeet which had an emphasized grabbing function.

And this small dinosaur specialized in stealing eggs from bigger dinosaurs.

And the author of the book put forward the hypothesis that it was from this reptile with its unusually sensitive nervous system that mammals, and therefore, people had evolved.

I decided that since a coded copy of the boy existed it should be possible to put this hypothesis which, it seemed to me, was highly dubious, to the test.

Two days later at school I made up my mind to show the card Starovertsev had left at my place, to Gromov himself.

On tenterhooks I felt as if I was falling into an abyss, but I had to clear up the mystery.

Picking a time when Drovodelov was out of the classroom, I fished the card from my pocket and handed it without a word to Gromov.

Not taking my eyes off his face and my heart beating furiously, I went first hot then cold, I even thought perhaps I was falling ill again. Such things have been known to happen.

That minute seemed to me to last an eternity.

"Well? What's so surprising?" Gromov said calmly, giving me back the card.

"What do you mean? Has the existence of the coded copy of the boy been confirmed then?"

"Yes."

"He quotes from a newspaper source. Was it in the papers?"

"No. Starovertsev heard about it from me. He cites a newspaper source to give his story greater credibility. He didn't want to quote it as coming from a private source. And I'm a private source."

Our conversation was interrupted by the bell. Mark Semenovich entered the classroom, drew a right-angled triangle on the board, and in his voice with its permanently doubting intonation, began to explain a formula to us. As he outlined the theorem, the piece of chalk squeaking on the blackboard, one got the impression he didn't believe in it himself. It was, of course, the intonation which didn't match the logical deductions arising from the formula, that was to blame.

Instead of listening to Mark Semenovich I was miles away thinking about the dinosaur which stole eggs from larger members of its own species. It can't be that mammals and therefore human beings are descended from a petty thief, I thought to myself: I didn't like the idea of such an ancestor at all. The truth of the matter could only be established with the help of the boy who had inhabited the Earth during the Jurassic period and whose coded copy had been found by Gromov's father.

At the mere thought that the coded copy of the boy existed and that I could learn more from Gromov as soon as the lesson ended, I was overcome by hot and cold shivers. I decided that the doctor, frightened off by the capricious doors of our lift, had brought me off the sick list too soon. I could only be

grateful to her. For there was not a minute to lose. But as Mark Semenovich continued with his explanation, looking in surprise at the triangle he had drawn on the blackboard and appearing to doubt when there was no longer any room for doubt, precious minutes were slipping by.

He has doubts, I thought, in a theorem worked out by Pythagoras or Euclid while I have no doubts whatsoever in the existence of the coded copy of the boy because I believe in what is written on the card and in Gromov.

Then the bell went. Mark Semenovich wiped the triangle and the formula from the board with a damp rag and went off to the teachers' room. I wanted to go up to Gromov, but Drovodelov was already standing beside him. And he wasn't just idling away time. In his hand was a sheet of paper covered all over with small figures. I decided it was some problem he was having difficulty in solving, but I was soon to be enlightened. On the sheet of paper were the calculations for the amount the boy would have eaten, drunk and breathed over his long journey. Drovodelov offered the sheet to Gromov in the same way, most probably, that a waiter, expecting payment, holds out the bill in a restaurant.

Gromov gestured with his hand as if indicating he didn't want to accept the sheet. Drovodelov, though, wasn't having any.

I realized that on this ill-starred day I wasn't going to get a chance of talking to Gromov. Drovodelov wouldn't let up.

On the way home I thought of the link connecting mammals to reptiles via the dinosaur whose forefeet had a grabbing function. And of how, had that dinosaur died for some reason, there would have been no mammals on the Earth and what is more, no me.

As I thought about this two voices inside me began arguing with one another again. One voice agreed with the hypothesis of the origin of mammals, the other raised objections to it.

I entered our building and pressed the button for the lift; it appeared to be out of order, for the button didn't light up. Walking up to the first floor I tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. Someone was sitting inside the lift and waiting to be rescued.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Me," answered an indignant female voice which I immediately recognised as belonging to our local doctor.

"We didn't call you," I said to her, "I am better."

"I'm not coming to you, I'm on my way to the fourth floor on an urgent call."

"Right," I said, "hang on, and I'll run up to our flat and ring for the emergency service."

And I started to tear up the stairs no longer thinking about either the boy or the dinosaurs. Instead I wondered why it was that our lift worked perfectly well when I, my mother and the other people who lived in the flats and their friends used it, but as soon as the doctor got into it, it immediately began playing

up. I thought about this, the theory of probability and the theory of games. And then I remembered the boy again.

8

Drovodelov, needless to say, got his way and eventually managed to foist his calculations on Gromov. Entering our classroom, I found Gromov holding the shameful bit of paper in his hand. Drovodelov was standing beside him and smirking. Once again, I had to postpone our conversation. But then Drovodelov walked off with his sheet of paper and I went up to Gromov.

"Would it be possible," I asked, "to meet the coded copy of the boy? There's a question I want to clear up."

My request sounded extremely stupid when spoken out aloud.

"What question?" asked Gromov in a calm and even indifferent tone of voice.

And I told him about the dinosaur and its forefeet with their grabbing function, and about the mammals who were hardly likely to approve a hypothesis linking their origins to this animal of doubtful repute.

"You want to put that question to the coded copy of the boy, is that it?" Gromov asked.

"Yes."

"You'll have to wait a bit then."

"Why?"

"First, because you're not the only person who wants to question it and second, because

Dad and his colleagues have long been trying to decipher the code and understand the language in which the boy thought and spoke."

At this point our conversation was again interrupted. The lesson had started. I was longing for the break, but the lesson went on and on... At last the bell rang and I asked Gromov:

"Couldn't I meet it, even so?"

"Meet what?"

"The copy."

"No. It's in the Institute of Archaeology and only laboratory staff have access to it."

"Have you seen it?"

"If you don't mind, I won't answer that question."

I was hurt as I had been when he had told us his flat was being done up. One could feel the suspicion in his voice.

Gromov must have guessed from the expression on my face I was hurt.

"Why don't you come round?" he said.

"But you've got the builders in."

"They left long ago. Come round tomorrow evening, I'll be at home."

He was about to say something else, but he didn't have time. The history teacher entered the classroom. She had only just started working at our school, didn't know any of us yet by name and had not the slightest suspicion of how much Gromov knew.

Opening the class attendance log, she called out the first surname that caught her eye:

"Gromov!"

Gromov stood up and she asked him a question about primitive society and about something that was even older still.

I watched her face while Gromov was answering. Her expression never stopped changing, it was a real picture, I can tell you.

And Gromov gave the sort of answer that he alone, in the whole school and perhaps on the whole of Vasilevsky Island, was capable of giving. And it seemed to us it wasn't him who was answering, but the people who lived at the time, and that through Gromov's even, reflective voice it was primitive society itself plus the facts and events it was made up of, that were speaking.

And I thought to myself it was more than probable that once they had decoded his language the boy would give just as calm and thoughtful an answer through the medium of his coded copy.

I can't be sure what our teacher thought about as she listened to Gromov's answers to her questions. She didn't utter a word though the swiftly changing expression on her face told all.

Then Gromov sat down and our history teacher got to her feet. She was obviously so taken aback that his surname slipped her mind.

"Groomov?" she said. Not one person in the class laughed, not even Drovodelov. It was a really tense moment, I can tell you.

"My name's Gromov, not Groomov," Gromov replied calmly.

"Thank you," said the teacher. She spoke

for some reason very quietly, so quietly that not everyone heard her.

And then for a whole minute she remained silent until the expression with which she had entered the classroom reappeared on her face. She was evidently making an effort to regain her composure in order to continue with the lesson in the normal way.

She didn't question anyone else, but began to talk herself in a calm, matter-of-fact tone of voice.

She talked to us about the distant past but this was a very different past to the one Gromov had described. It is difficult to explain what the difference was. The past she told us about appeared to have nothing at all to do with us. There is no link, I thought to myself. But our teacher had her own opinion on the matter. She spoke in a deadpan, measured voice as if reading from a textbook and very methodically. Most probably, this was how she had been taught to conduct lessons at teachers' training college: it was thought this would make it easier for us to understand what she was saying.

Gromov sat in his place by the window and seemed to be listening carefully. I could see the sky and the clouds through the window and Gromov, most probably, could see the people on the pavement and the old woman who ate plums and spat out the stones. In the past which our new teacher is telling us about, I thought to myself, none of these things, neither the window nor the people on the pavement nor the old woman who sometimes eats

cherries, sometimes apples and sometimes cracks nuts with her iron on the windowsill, existed. And because none of these things had existed in the past it became even more remote and unfriendly and difficult to believe in just like it was when our teacher talked to us about it...

9

Here I was at last standing before the door with its dark blue letterbox.

I rang, but for a long time there was no answer, perhaps there was no one at home?

I rang again. It was opened by Gromov himself, not father, of course, but son.

"Come in," he said and led me into the hall.

"I haven't been here for ages," I remarked. "Are your parents at home?"

"Mum is, Dad's at the institute. Why do you ask?"

"No special reason. Is the god with the obsidian eyes still hanging up?"

"Yes, you'll see it in a few minutes. Put your coat here. Have you seen Starovertsev?"

"What d'you mean? He's just had his appendicitis taken out."

"Appendix, not appendicitis. He's already on the mend and busy filling in his cards. I've had a questionnaire from him... What have you stopped for? Come in."

We went into Gromov's room, which before had been the nursery. As we passed

through the dining-room, I saw the glass eyes of the wooden god and its narrow figure with its small hands and slightly crossed legs.

"Well, what's the questionnaire about?" I asked.

"He's a real crank that Starovertsev. He asks questions that can only be answered by the boy or his coded copy. And, what's more, he demands an immediate reply in writing before he gets back to school."

"Are you going to answer him?"

Looking at me in astonishment, Gromov didn't say a thing.

So I asked:

"Have you got the next instalment about the boy?"

"Somewhere, if it hasn't got lost. We had the builders in. Why?"

"Read it to me."

"No," said Gromov. "I'm sorry I'm not in the mood. And then I don't like reading aloud."

"Go on, read it!" I begged him. "Please!"

My words sounded repugnant to me as did my voice, it was as if it was Drovodelov, not me who was speaking, but even so I went on pestering Gromov. I terribly badly wanted to know what happened to the boy and, what is more, before they broke his code.

"Read it, what's so difficult about it, go on, read it..."

"No," said Gromov in a firm voice. "I won't. But if you like I'll turn on the record player and we will listen to the tune written by the composer who... Dad's got a recording

of it in his study. But mind you don't tell anyone..."

He went into the study and soon reappeared carefully carrying a record. Then he turned on the gramophone so I could listen to the tune written by the composer millions of years before the human brain and hearing had made their appearance on the Earth.

I listened to the clear, radiant, flowing music. That was the sound of little pieces of ice knocking against each other, and water now gurgling, now roaring as it dashed over the boulders. The musician was pouring his heart out to us. Having overcome time and space it seemed he was standing right beside us.

The boy in Gromov's story had also become very real to us. He was full of mischief as children are apt to be, though his childhood had gone on for millions of years and had still not ended.

He was known as boy on the spaceship and this is how he referred to himself.

Gromov and I were also still boys, though our childhood would soon be over. But the boy's childhood went on and on merging with the sounds of the tune to which I was now listening.

When the tune came to an end I asked something which perhaps I shouldn't have done:

"Did your Dad find that recording together with the coded copy?"

"Of course not. Where did you get that idea from? It was written by one of Dad's

friends, a composer. At my request."

I looked at Gromov and my expression must have come close to that on the face of our new history teacher as she had listened to him answering her question. And taking pity on me, Gromov presumably regretted his words for he said:

"I see you were hoping it was written by the musician who was friends with the boy?"

"Yes, I was," I answered in a low voice.

"But it's good music, isn't it? Didn't you like it?"

"Yes. But I would have liked it more if it had been written by the musician before..."

"Before the time of reason and human hearing?" asked Gromov.

"Yes."

"But do you have any idea of what the Earth was like then?"

"I didn't before. But now, having listened to that music, I do. What about you?"

"I not only have an idea, I know what it was like," said Gromov quietly.

"How?"

"If you don't mind I'll skip that question..."

10

And I gave in and didn't insist on an answer to my question.

In other words, I left. I put on my coat in the hall and left. I felt I just couldn't go on pestering and sucking up to him.

But, most probably, another man in my

shoes wouldn't have gone off without establishing the truth. An explorer or important scientist, for instance, would have swallowed his pride for the sake of science and remained put where he was.

But I left. True, it didn't help me much. That night I virtually didn't sleep a wink.

The next day in class something unpleasant happened. I don't know why I call it unpleasant. But let it pass. Here's what happened.

A new, very young teacher of biology turned up instead of our old teacher who had retired. With the latter everything would have gone off alright, for he took everything in his stride.

The new teacher set Gromov a question. And Gromov, naturally, answered it. As usual, his answer wasn't in any way related to the school curriculum, that is not the point though. The point was that Gromov knew what no one else knew or could know. And the new teacher realized this. I could see he did, from his eyes. I've never seen such eyes, neither at the cinema nor the theatre. They seemed to swallow up his whole face. Everything was reflected in them: delight, horror, bewilderment, anger, despair, happiness and something else which I can't begin to convey in words.

I thought our teacher had been taken ill or had gone round the bend. He began to pace up and down the classroom as if he had forgotten all about us.

About five minutes went by and he was still pacing up and down.

Then he went up to Gromov.

He said something but so quietly I was unable to catch what it was. Only from Gromov's answer was I able to guess what they were talking about.

They were discussing the animals which had died out millions of years ago. And it wasn't just that Gromov had described them in too great detail and in a very lively manner. He let slip a word which he should on no account have uttered had he wanted to keep everything secret. The biology teacher objected to something and Gromov said:

"It's in the paleontology course, but I remember..."

And he started to spout one detail after another. It was as if he had decided he didn't care a damn—for the secret, the teacher or the top pupils and he again repeated the words "I remember"... Our teacher was struck dumb.

I was sorry for him and even sorrier for Gromov. And I shouted:

"It was just a slip of the tongue!"

The teacher seized on my words like a drowning man clutches at a straw. And somehow he managed to complete the lesson. Gromov also calmed down.

I was really pleased my quick wits had helped them out of an embarrassing situation.

But at this point, up jumps Drovodelov, smirking all over his face.

"Plato!" he shouted out to the whole class, "Plato, you're my friend, but the truth means more to me!"

11

I was very angry with Drovodelov for his lack of tact and the other kids were too. The truth, of course, had nothing to do with it...

Our new teacher fell ill: he went down with pneumonia. And it is said he sent Gromov a letter from Kuibyshev hospital. No one in the class knew the contents of the letter, not even Drovodelov. But Starovertsev saw the envelope on a table at Gromov's place. And from the sender's address he put two and two together.

I, for some reason, decided our teacher wanted to explain his state of mind to Gromov and why he had been in such a flap at the lesson. It would have been much wiser of him not to have said anything about this at all, though. I don't know whether there was any mention of the truth in the letter.

But I thought about the truth every time I saw Gromov. Then, suddenly, Gromov too stopped coming to school.

The rumour got round he was moving and not to Chernaya Rechka but to Akademgorodok, the Academy of Sciences research centre, outside Novosibirsk. The elections at the Academy of Sciences had just taken place and his father had been elected a corresponding member of the Siberian branch of the Academy. And since he had been elected, he had to go whether he wanted to or not.

At this point I again remembered about the truth. I realized Gromov would soon be

leaving and that Novosibirsk was a long way away and that I'd never succeed in finding out about the boy until something appeared about him in the press. I simply had to see Gromov before his departure. I waited for him to turn up at school, but there was no sign of him. Perhaps he had already collected all his leaving papers from school and was just waiting for his father to hand over his job.

The new biology teacher got better and was let out of hospital. He seemed nervous and embarrassed in class and from time to time would eye the empty place by the window where Gromov had sat. And a strange expression would appear in his eyes as if he saw something there that could not be seen by other people.

I also looked in that direction and saw the empty seat and the window. And through the window was the street with the passers-by on the pavement and sitting by the window opposite was the fat old woman who was eating apples and cracking nuts with her iron on the windowsill.

But the teacher saw something quite different there, his eyes said as much. Perhaps he saw the impressive picture Gromov had given us of the Earth in days gone by, before the time of man and mammals.

On the way home I heard the noise of footsteps behind me. I guessed someone was trying to catch me up: looking round I saw it was our new teacher.

Coming up, he walked for sometime along-

side me. We were both silent. Then our teacher asked:

"What do you think of Gromov?"

"Gromov's moving to Novosibirsk," I said. "He's going to live at Akademgorodok, the Academy of Sciences research centre. There's a school there for talented mathematicians and physicists. He, most probably, will go to it."

"Do you think he needs to go to that school?"

"Everyone tries to get in to it," I replied, "though by no means everyone is accepted, only the most talented. Gromov will get in immediately though."

"I don't have any doubts on that score either," said the teacher. "But what I'm wondering is, does he really need to go to secondary school? He knows too much."

"Yes," I agreed. "He knows a lot, too much even for a super bright pupil."

The teacher's face lit up. Bending down towards me, he asked in a confiding tone:

"Where does he get all his knowledge?"

"The answer's very simple," I replied. "His father has a first class library."

"Really?" said the teacher and I could tell from his voice he wasn't entirely satisfied by my answer. But when all is said and done what sort of answer did he think he would get? If he was expecting me to tell him everything I knew about the boy he could have another think coming.

After a few more steps, the teacher said:

"All the best," and turned down the Fifth Line.

I was pleased with myself that I had managed to avoid answering his question. But I then thought, what, after all, could I have told him? For I too was in the dark as to where Gromov got his knowledge.

On getting home I took down from the shelf a book I'd been given on my birthday and began to read it. It was called *I Want to Know Everything.* I liked the name though it seemed to me somewhat inaccurate, for surely one can't know everything. On the whole, however, it wasn't a bad book. It was informative like Starovertsev's cards.

I read for a bit, then I became bored. I went to the window and looked out of it. The snow was falling and our street looked as spick and span as a bright new pin. And without knowing why I suddenly felt happy, although I didn't live on a spaceship flying into the unknown but in the most ordinary of houses which had long been in need of repair. Nothing threatened our house, neither a chance encounter with a meteor nor other dangers of a similar sort. It wasn't going to come off course or get lost in the vast spaces of the Universe. It was an utterly ordinary scene. Below me on the other side of the street I could see the baker's with its old sign on which a delicious-looking twist of bread was depicted and the tailor's with a wax figure of a man wearing a baggy suit in the window and the telephone box, the same one that Drovodelov had stolen the receiver from.

And I felt somehow content and at peace with the world as if tomorrow was a holiday which was going to last a long, long time. But then my gaze fell on the entrance to the house where Gromov lived and my spirits were immediately dashed. And though there was nothing unusual about the entrance and the house itself, it seemed to me that through its door another world began, a world full of mystery. And I stood by the window wondering which of these worlds was the best: this one, with the baker's shop, the tailor's and the telephone box or the one with flying meteorites.

And at this point I remembered the boy who'd been deprived by fate of choice. He'd been born on a spaceship journeying into the unknown, since when he had gone on flying and flying. And through the wall of the module where he slept instead of a tailor's shop there was something called a void.

And I felt somehow on edge as if I had been talking aloud to a large room of people. I put on my coat and a minute later I was standing by that very same door.

I stood unable to bring myself to ring the bell. And I had just mustered up my courage when the door opened and Gromov's Dad appeared in his overcoat.

"Come in," he said to me. "He's at home."

And I stepped through the door, little suspecting when I did so what the outcome would be.

Gromov appeared to be pleased to see me.

"Come in," he said, "and take off your

coat. All our things are packed up."

Why he added the last sentence about their belongings, which were in fact all packed up, beats me.

As we walked through the dining-room I looked at the wall, but there was no god on it. It was lying on the floor, its narrow legs crossed, by a case.

Up to then I hadn't really taken in the fact that the Gromovs were going away. The god lying on the floor by the suitcase brought it home to me.

We went into the nursery and sat down and Gromov asked:

"Have you just dropped in or have you come on business?"

"On business," I replied.

Gromov immediately fell silent and I found it hard to start talking about why I'd come.

"Are you taking the skulls as well?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And the god?"

"Yes."

"What about the boy?"

The word slipped out almost without me wanting it to. I would have given a lot to have taken it back. There was an abrupt change of expression on Gromov's face. He somehow became remote as if he was no longer in the room with me, but on a television screen.

"What do you want with the boy?" Gromov asked in a low voice.

"I want to ask him a question."

"Go ahead then," Gromov said just as quietly, "I'll answer it."

"I want the boy to answer it."

"But I am the boy."

"You?"

"Yes. Surely you must have guessed?"

I didn't answer. I went first hot, then cold, beads of sweat came out on my forehead.

"Why don't you start asking your questions?"

"Later," I replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Next time."

"But tomorrow we are leaving for Novosibirsk."

"At what time?"

"Nine in the evening."

"I'll drop by after lunch then, alright?"

"Fine."

I didn't drop by after lunch, of course. But search me if I know why... Perhaps because I didn't know what to ask him. I couldn't ask him a silly question about a dinosaur with forefeet that grabbed things and which stole eggs from its neighbours. But, alas, I was so overcome all more important questions went out of my mind.

12

I remained in this het up state for a long time: about five or six days.Then I calmed down and no sooner had I done so than I began to think of masses of questions I should

have put to the boy, or rather Gromov. But Gromov was already a long way away, at the Academy of Sciences research centre, outside Novosibirsk. A new family had moved into the Gromovs' old flat. I saw a lorry drive up with their things. But they were very ordinary things: tables, beds, chairs, sofas. There'd be no hope of finding a god with crossed legs or numbered skulls among such belongings. And watching as the furniture was being carried into the building I felt very low. In the house across the road, I thought to myself, there used to be a very unusual flat and the Gromovs lived there, but now a new family has moved in and the process is irreversible as our physics teacher, Dmitry Spiridonovich, is fond of saying.

I was in a bad mood altogether at this time and the kids at school noticed it at once.

"Why are you looking so down in the dumps?" they asked.

"Gromov's left," I said.

"So what? It's not the end of the world. There's a new boy in his place and he seems to know a lot too. He comes from Gorky. Speaks three languages."

It was true, there was a new boy sitting in the seat by the window and at a distance he was even rather like Gromov to look at. He had the same thoughtful expression and straight, spiky hair.

And, like Gromov, he never stopped looking out of the window. Then he made a face at someone and put out his tongue. He's most probably seen the old woman opposite who

eats apples or cracks nuts with her iron, I thought to myself. Gromov, though, would never have done anything like that. He was always polite to everyone and to that old woman too.

There was no doubt about it, I was in a rotten mood and the questions I hadn't managed to put to Gromov worried me.

The lessons went on for ages. On the way home the new boy who now sat in Gromov's place by the window, turned up at my side.

"Do you live far away?" he asked.

I told him the name of our street and the number of our house. He was surprised.

"You must live opposite us then," he said.

And I realized he must have moved into Gromov's flat and that it was his things I'd seen in the lorry. Looking at him I couldn't make out what I felt for him. He couldn't be blamed for sitting in Gromov's place and for having moved into Gromov's flat. For Gromov would anyway have moved to Novosibirsk since his Dad had been made a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences. And besides there was something rather nice about him and most probably everything would turn out alright.

And I decided to try out on him one of the questions I had wanted to put to Gromov.

"Why," I asked him, "does our world exist?"

"It just does," he said.

"But what would happen," I went on, "if it didn't?"

"We wouldn't be around either," he said.

"That's no answer," I objected.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I want to know."

"Wanting is not enough."

"I want to know a lot, so there!"

"It is a stupid question."

"It's not at all stupid. You're stupid!"

"It's stupid, I tell you. It's too vague. One can't ask why the world exists."

"Of course one can."

"No, one can't."

"Gromov wouldn't have said that."

"Do you mean the person who used to live in our flat?"

"Not your flat, you're living in his flat."

"We moved in quite legally, he'd already moved out."

"He didn't move out, he went to Novosibirsk."

"Same thing. Do you play ping pong?"

"Yes."

"Come round then, after lunch, and we'll have a game."

"Perhaps I will," I said. "What's your name?"

"Igor," he replied, in a self-important tone. "Igor Dinaev."

Two voices argued inside me: should I go or not? In the end I went. More out of curiosity than anything else.

In the dining-room, instead of the god with crossed legs, a picture was hanging up. I didn't recognize the flat. There was furniture everywhere, new furniture, like in a furniture shop. When Gromov had lived there the flat to some extent had resembled a module

in a spaceship. There had been virtually nothing in it. And now because of the furniture and the painting, of a bather feeling the water with her toe, I felt quite out of sorts. I didn't even feel like playing ping pong. For some reason I was longing for a drink, but I thought of how people courageously overcome their thirst in a desert and I did the same.

"Why are you so quiet?" Igor asked.

"I'm thinking," I answered.

"What about?"

"It's nothing to do with you."

"Go on, tell me."

"I'm thinking about the Gobi Desert."

"Have you been there?"

"Never."

"Why are you thinking about it then?"

"I always think about places I've never been to."

"You must be a crackpot. You're a strange lot altogether at school. I noticed that straightoff. What's that boy you all talk about so much called?"

"Gromov."

"What's so special about him? Why do you all talk about him so much?"

I looked at the painting of the bather and at the new furniture. Then I said:

"They didn't have so much furniture."

"Who didn't?"

"The Gromovs."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

And I changed the conversation on purpose.

I didn't feel like discussing Gromov with him and here of all places.

Then I got up.

"So long. I've got some homework to do. We were given an awful lot today."

We were in fact given very little.

There's almost nothing else left to say. Without Gromov life at school became very ordinary. We soon got used to this and gradually forgot about him. Even I didn't think about him very much. They started to give us an enormous amount of homework and we had very little free time. But I tried, nevertheless, to improve my general knowledge. I read various books, including the one called *I Want to Know Everything.*

And a voice inside me (one of the two voices inside me) said it was impossible to know everything. The other one, reminding me of Gromov, said it was quite possible.

There was no news from Akademgorodok. And I'd begun to think Gromov had been joking when he told me before his departure that he and the boy were the same person.

Here is what happened on Saturday, after school.

I was on a tram with Mother. We were on our way to the Chernaya Rechka district to see some friends who had just moved there. Everything in the tram was just like it usually is. Some people were standing, holding on to the straps, others were sitting down. One of them was reading a paper. I gazed at it over his shoulder and the letters suddenly began jumping up and down as if I had Father's

glasses on. But even so I managed to read:

"The coded copies, found by Professor Gromov, of extraterrestrials who visited our planet during the Jurassic period are being studied... The archaelogist's fifteen-year-old son helped his father and his colleagues to get to grips with the psychology and knowledge of a boy from outer space... The boy appeared to have a vast memory..."

The words were leaping about on the page. And I came over all hot and cold.

"What's wrong?" Mother asked.

Not having time to answer, I dashed after the man with the newspaper who had got up and was making for the door.

"Your paper!" I shouted after him so loudly that everyone in the tram must have heard. "Let me have your newspaper!"

VALENTINA ZHURAVLYOVA

THE PEST

I first set eyes on this little girl three years ago, and then she was quiet as a mouse. She asked shyly for autographs and gazed into the writers' faces, eyes wide with amazement.

During those three years, she didn't miss a single meeting of the science fiction writers' association. To be honest, no one invited her. But no one chased her away either (and here, without a doubt, we are to blame and bear the full measure of responsibility). She sat on the edge of her chair, trying not to miss a single word. Even those who mumbled or obnoxiously babbled nonsense received the same undivided attention Cicero himself no doubt commanded in his time.

Gradually, we got used to her and to the fact that she was so quiet. Therefore, when

she finally started talking, we were quite taken aback. It happened during the discussion of a new novel which was overburdened with scientific explanations and empty verbosity. The author was very fond of his novel, and our criticism was having no effect on him whatsoever.

"So," said the author, smiling with good humor, "let's ask a child. As they say, 'From the mouths of babes and sucklings...' Hmm... Well, my dear, did you like anything about my book?"

And the little girl replied eagerly:

"Yes, of course."

"Wonderful, very good!" exclaimed the author, grinning from ear to ear, then asked: "What exactly did you like?"

"Antokolsky's poem. On page fourteen, there are eight lines, and they were wonderful!"

And then I saw that the shy little girl had disappeared, only to be replaced by a brazen little devil in green britches and a lilac jacket, the pockets of which were bulging with books. Her malicious eyes were outlined (not very skillfully as yet) in black eyeliner.

From that moment on, our meetings, as the first author to suffer so succinctly said, turned into smoke breaks next to a powder keg.

The Pest was rather condescending with me, reserving her most scathing comments for after the meetings, as she was accompanying me home. I invited her over once, and after that, she would turn up on my doorstep

almost every evening. But that didn't bother me a bit. She would rummage through my books, find something interesting, then sit on the divan for hours on end in silence. Of course, this silence was relative. She bit her nails, grunted with satisfaction, and if something really struck her fancy, she would whistle. This was how she imagined the crab-spiders from some science fiction story she had read whistled. She read everything—not just science fiction.

"By the way, Romeo was a fool," she said, laying aside a volume of Shakespeare. "Let me tell you how he should have abducted Juliet..."

However, her only true love was science fiction. She read even the worst stories and then stared blankly at the ceiling for ages. There was no way to break her of this habit, for she was imagining herself in the heroes' places, reworking the plot. In the process, she frequently lost all sense of what she had read and what she had invented herself.

One day, for example, she announced in all seriousness that she had met up with an invisible cat.

"I could hear the sounds, but I couldn't see the cat. So I realized at once that I had found it."

"What?"

"The cat Griffin performed the experiment on. After that, Camp asked the Invisible Man, 'Can it be that even now an invisible cat is wandering over the Earth?' And Griffin replied: 'Why not?' How can you forget such

things?! That invisible cat must have had invisible kittens. Don't you see?.."

In general, the Pest noticed minor details in science fiction stories almost no one else picked up on. What happened to the model of the time machine, for example. The model, mind you, and not the actual machine. Wells' novel implies that the model set off to travel through time. So why was it that after Wells so many stories about the time machine were written and not a single one about the model?

Moreover, the thing that interested this girl the most was, "Why not now?" She said it as one word: "Whynotnow?" Could, for example, the decapitated head of some professor be revived, "whynotnow?" Could the bathtub be filled with some thin gel and someone be submerged in it to hybernate for centuries, "whynotnow?"

Once she came upon a story of a man who flew with wings that had electroplastic muscles. She flipped the pages of the magazine back and forth for a long time, examining the pictures, then inquired:

"Whynotnow?"

She quit reading for three days and pestered me to death with that "whynotnow?" of hers.

Finally, I took her to see an engineer I knew. This man had the patience of Job: he could converse calmly with anyone, even with inventors of *perpetuum mobile.*

The little pest pulled out the magazine at once and demanded, "whynotnow?" So the

engineer got out a book about the theory of flight and explained in great detail why not now.

The bigger a living creature, the less favorable the ratio between the power it produces and its weight. Therefore, such big birds as bustards and swans can't fly very well. A horse couldn't fly even if it had wings. Man lies somewhere on the border of an acceptable power/weight ratio, for the power a man can produce is sufficient to raise 70-80 kilos into the air. However, when we take the weight of the wings into account, this ratio becomes unfavorable.

The engineer explained all this to the Pest most carefully, using figures, illustrations, and examples. She listened without interrupting and crinkled her nose suspiciously. Since I didn't know her very well then, I didn't realize what that gesture meant.

She disappeared for about ten days, then she showed up with a battered suitcase tied shut with string. I thought she was going on a trip.

"Here are the wings!" she spat out.

She was hopping with impatience. I was surprised that the Pest had actually done something: up till that point, she had limited herself to theoretical pronouncements.

"The boys made the wings." Unlike the way she usually spoke, this was said with slow solemnity. "I thought them up, and they made them."

This was something new. Some boys had appeared on the scene.

"Now I'll explain," she said, tugging at the string holding the suitcase shut. "We've already tried them, and they work really well!"

I was used to her imagination and expected to hear something at least a bit fantastic. But she explained her idea, and it was actually quite simple, or in any case, it seemed realistic. Moreover, she explained it all in a few words.

A person weighs too much to fly with wings. So we shouldn't try to build a muscle-plane for him, she explained, inventing the necessary words as she went along. A muscle-plane should be built for animals that were lighter than man.

"In general, it's sheer egoism," announced the Pest, "that for the past thousand years, man has been thinking of wings for himself alone. Why not make wings for animals?"

Why not, indeed? The explanation had taken an unexpected turn, and I did not know what to reply.

In the suitcase was a large sherbet cat. The creature was lying on an ordinary umbrella. Or more precisely, on a former umbrella, for these were wings made of an umbrella.

"Now, you'll see," said the Pest and proceeded to fasten the wings to the cat.

The feline was absolutely calm throughout all this. I had never seen such an unflappable cat in my life. The beast did not express its displeasure in any way while the Pest was strapping its wings on with a belt. The large black wings made the poor cat resemble a pterodactyl like those in the illustrations to

science fiction stories. It did not seem concerned in the least that it had just become the world's first winged cat.

The beast squinted and glanced lazily about the room, then yawned good-naturedly and made its way unhurriedly to the armchair. The Pest helped the cat up, and it folded its wings under itself and was fast asleep in the twinkling of an eye.

I explained to the Pest where she had miscalculated. It wasn't enough to have wings. The entire organism had to be adapted to flight. Here, anatomy wasn't the only important factor: the psychology of the animal had to be taken into account. An animal had to know how to fly and want to fly for it to get off the ground.

That was terribly logical, but the Pest crinkled her nose and shook her head.

"What's all this psychological stuff," she said in an offhand manner. "That cat has a psychology, too..."

She got her jacket from the front hall, rummaged in its infinite pockets, pulled out a mouse, and put it on the table. A live one, mind you. Everything else happened so fast it made my head swim. The sherbet cat leapt toward the table in a flash and as quickly as if it had been shot from a cannon. The cat had probably calculated the leap correctly, but it had forgotten about the wings, which opened with a snap when the hapless creature was already in the air. So the cat soared past the table. It was a gigantic leap, and if it hadn't been for the wall, the cat would have

flown for thirty meters or more. The poor beast smashed into the wall, shook its head wildly, and flew up to the ceiling. The wings creaked and banged, and this frightened the cat, so it circled the chandelier quite rapidly. Then something happened to the wings, because the cat, thrashing and hissing, plopped onto the chair...

We were silent for a while: the only sound was the labored breathing of the frightened pussy.

"That's too bad," the Pest finally said. "We should have gotten a bat, and the cat would have flown around after it for all he was worth. What do you think, can flying cats do anything to help the economy?"

I assured the Pest that the economy would survive quite well without flying cats. And flying dogs, too. I was sure the Pest would think up a way to make dogs fly next.

"Flying dogs..." she pondered. "Flying sheep dogs would have an easier time looking after their herds. But it would be better if those ... what are they ... could fly. Then they wouldn't need to be protected. They would be able to fly away if there was any danger."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sheep," impatiently snapped the Pest. "Sheep or rams... They would be able to fly to alpine meadows. Wouldn't that be great?"

I realized I would have to be extremely careful with the Pest. She could pervert any idea to suit her own conceptions, and there was no telling what she might come up with.

Choosing my words carefully, I explained to the Pest that it was not a matter of mere chance that some animals have wings while others do not. In essence, wings are appropriate in some cases, and some cases only. Wings are useful only when an animal spends a considerable portion of its time in the air. In all other cases, wings would only be an unnecessary burden to the animal, dead weight to lug around.

The Pest silently stuffed the cat back into the suitcase.

"Don't be discouraged," I said as she put her jacket on.

She threw a blank gaze my way and said distractedly:

"Yeah, sure..."

A week later, an article appeared in the city paper: "Can Chickens Fly?" The author, a Ph. D. in biology, wrote that over the past few days, local residents had observed a peculiar phenomenon of nature: a chicken flying for long periods and at great heights. It had been considered up till then, noted the scientist, that the chicken's wings were poorly suited to flight. But obviously, insufficient study had been done on such a seemingly familiar creature as the chicken. The article ended in the following manner: "There is no doubt that in time, science will unravel this mystery of Nature as well."

I had no doubts whatsoever that there were no mysteries involved here: the Pest was responsible for everything. And by the way, so was I. After all, I was the one who had told

her that wings should not be just dead weight. Perhaps that was what had given her the idea about the uselessness of chicken wings.

I called the engineer I had taken the Pest around to see.

"You know, there's something to that," he said when he had heard my contradictory explanations. "No, really, there is. After all, bionics—technology copying nature—is thriving. So why shouldn't the reverse of that branch of science exist? You could consider that girl of yours the founder of a new branch of science concerned with adapting technological developments to nature. Judge for yourself. After all, they shoe horses, don't they? What's that you say? Flying sheep? I don't know about that. But if you take a rabbit or a jerboa... I'll do a few calculations this evening and see what I come up with."

There was another article in the next day's paper. This story noted that the swans which had lived happily in the ponds of the city park for the past eight years had suddenly risen to the air at great speed and flown off for parts unknown.

I was rereading the article when my doorbell rang. It was the Pest, and I had never seen her in such an exuberant mood.

"I have a brilliant idea!" she exclaimed from the threshold. She was terribly pleased with herself and was not in the least put off by my gloomy appearance. "I'll tell you all about it right now..."

"You mean about the chicken?" I inquired with mild curiosity.

"The chicken—oh, that's nothing!" the Pest said with a wave of her hand. "That was a piece of cake."

Then I asked about the swans. The Pest frowned impatiently.

"The swans are no big deal either. Maybe they just decided to spent most of their time in the air... You said it yourself. All we had to do was make their wings longer, so we glued on more feathers. That keeps their wings from being dead weight. You know, you can make pigeon's wings longer too, and then they can fly faster. But fish will be even more interesting."

"Fish, you say?" I asked frantically, trying to gain time.

"Yes, of course," she continued. "You see, their fins are like wings, too. Dolphins, for instance. Imagine how well they'll be able to fly! Or swordfish... They can go eighty kilometers an hour as it is. So if we attach wings, just think of the results... So do you think the economy needs flying fish?.."

For an instant, I was afraid I would lose my cool and not know what to say. This pesty little girl standing before me suddenly seemed to be the living incarnation of fantasy—the very essence of the genre. And this incarnation was impatient, not wanting to know any boundaries. She had a scratched nose and sparks in her eyes. I had to do something fast. So I fell back on evolution: wings and fins were the result of a long process of selection which resulted in the most utilitarian forms.

"What do I care about evolution!" exclaimed the Pest, cutting me off. "After all, evolution isn't finished, yet. It is continuing even now, but very slowly. So why don't we speed it up a bit? Whynotnow? After all, you can do everything faster. We'll speed up evolution. Don't you see?"

I could already imagine this "sped up" world in which flying cats chased after bats, where winged dogs raced after flying rabbits, where elephants on water-wings caught up with winged dolphins, and where fishermen suspended their nets from hot air balloons... It suddenly occurred to me that I had opened Pandora's box. And I felt—in all seriousness—a sense of responsibility before all humanity.

Fortunately, I was saved by a flash of inspiration just then. It was a brilliant idea that worked quite well, and it came just in the nick of time. Just a minute longer, and nothing would have been able to stop the Pest.

"Wings, for goodness sake! Who needs them?!" I said, trying to keep a straight face. "Anything can fly on silly old wings. They're already so outmoded it makes me want to laugh. Antigravity—now that's another matter entirely. True, some people think that's an idea for the distant future. But why? Whynotnow?.."

* * *

Now, as I am writing these lines, the Pest is sitting in an armchair by the window with her legs crossed. She is reading all by Landau and Kitaigorodsky. She's been reading nothing but

physics for two months now. And nothing terrible or even out of the ordinary has happened in all that time. She just sits there with her nose in a book, biting her nails and mechanically wrapping her hair around her index finger. Everything is calm and quiet.

For the time being at least.

VADIM SHEFNER

MODEST GENIUS

1

Sergei Kladezev was born in Leningrad on Vasilevsky Island. He was an exceptional child. While other children were making sand pies and castles in the sand box, he was sketching the mechanical parts of strange-looking machines. In the second grade he constructed a portable device which was powered by a flash light battery. This device was able to tell any student how many "C's" he would receive for one week. The device was declared unpedagogical, and the adults took it away from the young boy.

After graduating from high school, Sergei enrolled in the Electrochemical Technical School. Among his classmates were quite a number of attractive young women, but Sergei paid them no attention—perhaps because he saw them every day.

One day in June he rented a small boat and set off down the Malaya Neva to the gulf. By Volny Island he saw two unfamiliar girls in a boat; they were grounded on the shallows and had broken their oar in an attempt to extricate themselves. He helped them to the boat station, got acquainted with them, and began to visit them. Both girls lived on Vasilevsky Island.

Lusya was taking typing courses, while Sveta considered that her high school diploma was sufficient. Besides, her well-to-do parents often told her that it was time she settled down and got married, and deep in her heart she agreed with them. But she was very particular and had no intention of marrying the first man to come along.

At first Sergei was drawn more to Lusya, but he didn't know how to approach her. She was so pretty and retiring, so self-conscious and easily embarrassed, that Sergei also felt uneasy whenever he was around her. Sveta, on the other hand, was a saucy, lively girl, a real live wire, as they say, and Sergei felt totally at ease with her, although he himself was shy by nature.

In July of the following year Sergei accidentally ran across Sveta in a small village outside of Leningrad where he was visiting a friend. It turned out that she was there visiting some relatives. It was a total coincidence, but Sergei felt as if their meeting had been ordained by fate. Each day after that he went with Sveta to the woods and the lake. And soon he began to feel that he could no longer

live without Sveta.

But the fact was that Sveta was not overly attracted to him. She considered him terribly ordinary, and she had always dreamed of an extraordinary husband. She went with Sergei to the woods and the lake simply because she had to spend her time with someone. For Sergei, however, those were blissful days, and he had no inkling of Sveta's true feelings towards him.

One evening they stood gazing out at the lake from the shore. A streak of moonlight, like a carpet woven by mermaids, lay upon the water's smooth surface. It was quiet all around, save for the nightingales singing in the wild lilac bushes on the other shore.

"How beautiful and peaceful!" Sergei said.

"Yes, the view's fantastic," Sveta replied. It would be nice to pick some lilac, but it's too far to walk all the way around to the other shore. And we don't have a boat. And we just can't run across the lake."

They walked back to the settlement and went their separate ways home. But Sergei sat up the entire night sketching out various formulas and diagrams on a piece of paper. That morning he went back into town and spent two days there. He returned with some kind of bundle.

When they went out for a walk to the lake late the next evening, he took the bundle along with him. Right at the water's edge he unwrapped it and pulled out two pairs of special skates which were designed to glide over the water.

"Here, put on these water skates," he said to Sveta. "I invented them specially for you."

They put on the skates and easily glided across the lake to the opposite shore. When they reached the other shore they picked some lilac branches and then skated around the lake for a long time in the moonlight with two bouquets in their hands.

After that they began going to the lake every evening. They glided effortlessly over the lake's smooth surface on their water skates, leaving in their wake a light, narrow trail which quickly dispersed.

Once Sergei stopped suddenly at the very center of the lake. When Sveta skated over to him, he turned to her and said:

"Sveta, you know what?"

"No, what is it?" she asked.

"Sveta, I love you."

"Oh God, that's all I needed!" Sveta said.

"You don't care for me at all, then?"

"No, you're not a bad fellow, but my ideal is different. The man I'm looking for will be someone out of the ordinary. And you're an ordinary guy—I'm being perfectly honest with you."

"I realize that you're being honest," Sergei replied sadly.

They returned to the shore in silence, and the following day Sergei left for town. For some time afterwards he was totally out of sorts. He lost weight, and spent hours on end walking around the streets. Some days he

would take a trip to the country and wander around there. In the evenings he tinkered around at home in his small workshop.

While strolling around one day he met Lusya on the embankment by the sphinxes. He noticed immediately that she seemed glad to see him.

"What are you doing here, Sergei?" she asked.

"Just walking. I've got to do something with my vacation."

"I'm just walking around too," Lusya said. "Why don't we go to the park?" she added, blushing.

They went to Yelagin Island and strolled through the park for a long time. They met several times after that and walked around the city. They enjoyed each other's company.

Early one morning Lusya came to Sergei's place—they were planning to take a trip to Pavlovsk that day.

"What a mess you have here!" Lusya said. "All these instruments ... flasks.... What is all this for?"

"Oh, nothing special. I spend my spare time inventing various trifles," Sergei replied.

"I had no idea," Lusya said in surprise. "Then maybe you could fix my typewriter for me? I bought it in a second-hand shop, it's an old model. Every now and then the ribbon gets jammed."

"Sure. I'll stop by and take a look at it."

"What is this?" Lusya asked. "Some sort of strange camera. I've never seen one like this."

"That's an ordinary camera, only it has an attachment. It's something I just recently designed. With this attachment you can photograph the future. You just point the lens at the quadrate area which you would like to see transposed into the future, and release the shutter. But my attachment is still very imperfect—it won't photograph any further than three years into the future."

"But three years into the future—that's a lot! You've made a great discovery!"

"It's nothing so great..." Sergei brushed her off. "It's still very crude."

"Do you have any photographs?"

"Yes. I just recently took some pictures out in the countryside".

Sergei pulled a couple of snapshots from his desk drawer.

"Look, here I shot this birch tree in the meadow the way it is right now, without the attachment. And the same birch tree is on this shot, only the way it will look two years from now."

"It's grown a bit," Lusya said. "And it has more branches."

"And here it is three years from now," Sergei said.

"But there's nothing here!" Lusya exclaimed. "Only some kind of stump, and a pit nearby that looks like a crater. And look over there, in the distance: some kind of soldiers in strange uniforms are crouched down and running... I don't understand a thing!"

"Yes, I was amazed myself when I developed this shot," Sergei said. "It's my guess that

there'll probably be some kind of military manoeuvres there."

"And now take a picture of me the way I'll look in one year's time. Right here in this armchair by the window."

"The attachment only captures a quadrate area and what will be there. If you won't be sitting in this chair one year from now, then you won't appear in the shot."

"Go ahead and take it anyway. Who knows, one year from now on this very day I might be sitting in this chair."

"Alright," Sergei said. "I just happen to have one frame left on the roll."

He photographed Lusya in the armchair with the time frame set for one year ahead.

"I'll go ahead and develop it right now," he said. "No one's doing their wash in the bathroom today."

He went into the bathroom, rewound the film, placed it in an ebonite tank, and developed it. Then he soaked it in a fixing solution, washed it off, and carried it out into the other room to dry, fastening it with a clothespin to a string draped across the window.

Lusya grasped the edge of the film and looked at the last frame. Although from the negative it was difficult to judge, it appeared that the person sitting in the armchair was not her. And she had wanted to see herself sitting there in a year's time. "No, that probably is me," she decided. "Only I didn't turn out very well."

When the film had dried, they went into the bathroom where a red light was already

burning. Sergei placed the film into the enlarger, turned on the light, and in the safelight lamp of the enlarger the image was projected onto the photographic paper. He quickly placed the shot into the developer. The picture began to develop. The outlines of some strange woman sitting in the armchair began to take shape. She was sitting there embroidering a large cat on a piece of cloth. The cat was almost finished, only its tail was still missing.

"That's not me," Lusya said disappointedly. "Some totally different woman!.."

"Yes, it's not you," Sergei confirmed. "But I don't know who it is. I've never seen that woman before."

"I think it's time for me to go, Sergei," Lusya said. "And don't bother coming around any more. I'll take my typewriter to a repair shop myself."

"At least let me see you home."

"No, Sergei, there's no need. You know, I don't want to interfere in your life."

And with that she left.

"No, my inventions don't bring me happiness," Sergei thought to himself. He picked up a hammer and smashed the attachment.

2

Two months passed. Then one day Sergei Kladezev spied a young woman sitting on a street bench and recognized her as the stranger in the photograph.

"Could you tell me the time?" the stranger asked him.

Sergei told her the exact time and sat down beside her on the bench. They began talking about the Leningrad weather, and soon became acquainted. Sergei learned that her name was Tamara. They began to see one another, and before long they were married.

Later their son was born, and Tamara named him Alfred.

Tamara turned out to be a rather boring woman. She had no special interests and spent all her time sitting in the armchair by the window embroidering cats, swans and deer on rugs which she would then hang proudly on the wall. She didn't love Sergei. She had married him because he had a separate room to himself. And also because she had graduated from the Horse Breeding Institute, and the only way to avoid being assigned to work in some remote backwoods was to get married.

Because Tamara was such a boring woman, she considered Sergei a boring, uninteresting, and mediocre person. She didn't like the fact that he spent his spare time tinkering around with his inventions and considered this a waste of time. She harped at him continually for cluttering up the room with his gadgets and instruments.

Sergei found a way to create more space by constructing a LAAGD—a small Localized Action Anti-Gravitational Device. Now with the help of the LAAGD he could work on the ceiling. He covered the ceiling with parquetry and moved his work bench and all his instruments up there. So as not to soil the portion of the wall which he traversed on his trips

from floor to ceiling and back, he nailed up a narrow linoleum runner along the wall. Now the lower half of the room belonged to his wife, and the upper half became Sergei's laboratory and workroom.

But Tamara was still not satisfied. Now she began to worry that the building management would find out about this increase of living space and begin to charge double rent. In addition, she did not appreciate the fact that Sergei could simply walk around on the ceiling. She considered this indecorous.

"You could at least have some respect for my higher education and quit walking around upside down," she said to him from the armchair below. "All my friends have husbands that act like normal people, and I wound up with such a dolt!"

When he returned home from work (he now worked as a quality control inspector at the Energy Control Bureau), Sergei ate a quick dinner and walked up the wall to his laboratory. Sometimes he would go out and wander through the city and its environs in order to escape Tamara's constant reproaches. He got so much practice walking that he could cover great distances with ease.

One evening while roaming around he accidentally ran into Sveta.

"I married an extraordinary man," Sveta announced straight off. "My Petya is a genuine inventor. At present he's only a junior inventor for the research establishment Everything for the Consumer, but he'll be promoted to senior inventor soon. Petya has already come

up with one invention—it's soap called Hands Off!"

"What kind of soap is that?" Sergei asked.

"The concept behind it is brilliantly simple. Hands Off is a bar of normal toilet soap, but inside is a briquette of indelible Indian ink. If someone—for example, your communal apartment neighbor—steals this soap and starts to wash with it, he'll smear himself with it, both physically and morally."

"But what if no one steals this soap?" Sergei asked.

"Don't ask silly questions!" Sveta exclaimed angrily. "You're probably just jealous of Petya."

"Do you ever see Lusya?" Sergei asked. "How is she getting along?"

"Lusya's the same as ever. I keep telling her to find some extraordinary man and marry him, but she doesn't answer. It looks like she wants to be an old maid."

Shortly after that a war broke out.

Tamara and her son were evacuated to another area, and Sergei Kladezev left for the front. He started out as a junior lieutenant in the infantry, and by the end of the war had been promoted to the rank of senior lieutenant. He was wounded twice, but fortunately neither was serious. At the front he continued to ponder over various inventions, but he had neither materials nor a laboratory in which to work them out. When the war ended he returned to Leningrad, exchanged his uniform for civilian clothes, and resumed his job at the Energy Control Bureau. Soon Tamara and

Alfred returned home from evacuation and life resumed its former course.

The years passed.

3

Alfred grew up, graduated from school, and enrolled in a three-week crash training course in hotel management. Shortly afterwards he headed south and found himself a job in a hotel.

Tamara still spent all her time embroidering cats, swans and deer on rugs. She grew even more boring and quarrelsome. What was more, she had met a certain unmarried retired director and now threatened to leave Sergei if he didn't soon come to his senses and quit his inventing.

Sveta remained very satisfied with her Petya. Petya was doing very well—he had already been promoted to senior inventor. He had even designed special quadrangular spikes to replace the circular ones normally used for bicycle wheels. Sveta was extremely proud of him.

Lusya still lived on Vasilevsky Island, and worked as a typist in the office of a shop where spare parts for pianos were designed and built. She was still unmarried and often thought about Sergei. Once she had seen him from a distance but had not approached him—he had been on his way to the Baltic Movie Theatre with his wife. Lusya immediately recognized her as the woman in the photograph.

Sergei also thought about Lusya a lot. He tried to get her off his mind by thinking up new inventions. But since he had no academic degree, no one attached much importance to his discoveries. He had no idea of how to go about getting them recognized, nor was he especially eager to try. He was always convinced that his gadgets were still very imperfect and there was no reason for him to go sticking his nose where it didn't belong. For example, he invented a device called a "squabble-breaker" and set it up in the kitchen of his communal apartment. This device had a twelve-point scale and measured the moods of the residents as well as the intensity of the squabbles if they broke out. At the first hostile word the arrow began to quiver and move up the scale until it reached the red line. Upon reaching this point, the arrow set the squabble-breaker into operation. Soft, soothing music would resound, an automatic atomizer would disperse a cloud of valerian essence mixed with some perfume, and a tiny man would spin about on the screen, bow to the public, and say: "Live in peace, citizens!" In such a way the squabble was nipped in the bud, and everyone in the apartment was grateful to Sergei for his modest invention.

Sergei also invented a planar optical system. After processing a piece of window glass in this way, it acquired the properties of a lens with enormous magnification. He mounted this glass in the window of his room and was able to see Martian canals, lunar craters, and

Venusian storms. Whenever Tamara's harping grew unbearable, he consoled himself by looking at distant worlds.

But there was no practical benefit from all these inventions. The only thing he was able to economize on was matches. This was due to the fact that Sergei had discovered a way to convert water into benzene. Since he was a heavy smoker he was able to save money by acquiring a cigarette lighter and refilling it with his own benzene. All in all, he led a rather dreary existence. And neither Tamara nor his son Alfred afforded him much joy.

When Alfred came to visit them in Leningrad, he talked for the most part with Tamara.

"How are you making out?" he would ask her.

"What a life I have..." Tamara would moan. "The only thing that brings me comfort is my art. Just look at the deer I'm working on!"

"What a deer!" Alfred would exclaim. "It looks almost real! And look at those antlers. If I had a pair of antlers like that I could go far in life!"

"Now your father doesn't understand the least thing about art. All he ever thinks about is his inventions. He's not good for much of anything."

"At least he doesn't drink. You've got to give him that," her son said, trying to bolster her spirits. "I know he hasn't moved very far up the ladder in life, but maybe he'll still come to his senses. When I look at some of the people who stay at the hotel, I really feel

bad for Papa. One works at a ministry, another's a foreigner, yet another's a scholar. Just recently we had a senior lecturer staying in one of our luxury suites—it seems he wrote a biography of Pushkin. He has a car and a house in the country to boot."

"What hope do I have of ever owning a house in the country with a husband like mine," Tamara moaned. "I've had it with him! I want a divorce."

"Do you have anyone on the line?"

"There is one retired director. He's single. And he appreciates art. I gave him an embroidered swan and he was tickled pink. Now that's someone you could go far with."

"Where did he work? Not a hotel by any chance?"

"He was the director of a cemetery. He's a serious, tactful person."

"Well of course, with a position like that," her son agreed.

4

Once in June Sergei Kladezev spent the entire evening up on the ceiling working on a new invention. He was so engrossed in his work that when he finally glanced at the clock he discovered to his surprise that it was very late. He went straight to bed, but forgot to set the alarm, and the next morning he overslept. When he woke up he decided not to report for work at the bureau that day. That was the first and last time that he missed a day from work.

"Your inventions will be your ruin!" Tamara exclaimed. "It would be different if you had some other business to attend to on the side, but to miss work for no reason at all! Intelligent people raise strawberries and the like to bring in extra money, but you're absolutely good for nothing."

"Don't get upset, Tamara. Everything will be alright," Sergei said evenly. "My vacation is coming up soon, and we'll take an excursion along the Volga."

"I don't need your shoddy excursions!" Tamara shouted. "You'd be better off taking an excursion behind your back, listening to what others say about you! I'll bet you anything that they all make fun of you and call you an arrant fool."

She angrily tore down a rug with an embroidered cat from the wall and stormed out somewhere.

Sergei remained in the room and thought for a long time until he finally decided to take an excursion behind his back as his wife had recommended.

He had long ago invented an Invisible Presense Unit—IPRU—with an operating radius of thirty-five kilometers. Sergei had never used this IPRU in the city because he felt it was unethical to spy on others' apartments and pry into their lives. Every now and then he would tune in on the woods in the city's outlying regions and observe the birds building their nests and listen to their singing.

But now he decided to employ the IPRU inside the radius of the city. He switched on

the power and then turned the distance tuning knob up a slight notch. Then he pointed the searcher antenna towards the kitchen of the communal apartment in which he lived. Two women with whom he shared his apartment were standing by the stove gossiping about this and that. Suddenly one of them said:

"Tamara went to see her director again today. That woman's got no shame!"

"I feel sorry for Sergei Vladimirovich!" the second said. "He's such a good person and his wife will be his ruin. He's really bright, you know."

"I agree with you," the other said. "He's obviously a good person and very clever. Only he's not very fortunate in life."

Sergei tuned out of the kitchen and aimed the antenna in the direction of the Energy Control Bureau. He picked up strange apartments, offices, and shops for some time until at last the room where he usually worked appeared on the screen. His fellow employees were drinking tea and eating sandwiches—it was lunch break.

"I wonder what has happened with our Sergei Vladimirovich?" one of his co-workers said. "Such a decent person, always on time, and all of a sudden he doesn't show up for work! He's probably taken sick. He doesn't have a telephone in his apartment so there's no way of finding out what happened."

"It feels sort of empty here without him," said a second colleague. "He's a good man, there's no doubt about it."

"He's a fine person," a third agreed. "Only

he deserves better than that wife of his. She's a typical philistine. She makes life miserable for him."

Sergei switched off the IPRU and got to thinking. He thought once more about Lusya, and felt an overwhelming desire to see her, if even for a moment.

He switched the unit back on and began to search for Lusya's room on the sixth floor of the building on the Eleventh Line of Vasilevsky Island. "Maybe she's no longer even living there," he thought to himself. "Maybe she got married long ago and moved to a different place? Or maybe she simply switched apartments?"

Strange apartments and strange people floated across the screen, fragments of other's lives torn from space... At last he found Lusya's apartment building. She wasn't home, but there was no doubt that it was her room. The same picture hung on the wall and he recognized many of her things lying around. And a typewriter stood on a small table. Sergei breathed a sigh of relief, concluding that Lusya was simply at work.

Then he began tuning the unit in on Sveta's building. He wondered how she was getting along. He found her in no time at all. There were many new things in her apartment, but Sveta herself had visibly aged, and had lost her girlish bounciness and pep. But she appeared to be satisfied and happy.

Suddenly the doorbell rang, and Sveta walked over to answer it.

"Lusya! Hello! You haven't been by for

ages!" Sveta exclaimed.

"I thought I'd stop by to see you for a minute—I'm on lunch break," Lusya said, and her image materialized on the screen. She, too, had grown no younger over the years, but she was still as lovely as ever.

The two friends walked into the room and began talking about this and that.

"You still have no plans to get married?" Sveta asked suddenly. "It's still not too late for you to find yourself a decent, middle-aged husband."

"No, I'm not looking for anyone," Lusya answered sadly. "The one man that I love has been married for years."

"You mean you're still hung up on that Sergei?" Sveta said. "I can't understand what you see in him! There's nothing extraordinary about him at all. Granted, he was a decent fellow. I remember he gave me some water skates. We used to skate around the lake on them. Nightingales warbling on the shore, everyone's sound asleep in their houses, and we're gliding around on the water—what a trip!"

"I never knew that he had invented such skates," Lusya said pensively. "Do you still have them?"

"Are you kidding? My Petya turned them over to the salvage collection center long ago. He said that they were a bunch of nonsense. Petya's a real inventor; he knows what is what."

"Are things going well for Petyà?" Lusya asked.

"He's doing just fine. His latest invention is the MUCOU-I. It's a daringly innovative technological idea."

"And what is a MUCOU-I?"

"A Mechanical Universal Can-Opening Unit—that's what! Now housewives and bachelors will no longer have to fuss with opening cans."

"Do you have one of these units here?" Lusya asked. "I'd be interested to see it."

"No I don't, nor will I be likely to. It will weigh something like five tons, and rest on a concrete foundation. And it will cost a fortune."

"What housewife could ever afford to buy this MUCOU?" Lusya asked in astonishment.

"My God, Lusya, can't you see?" Sveta exclaimed. "The thing is that not every housewife will have to buy this unit. One is enough for the entire city. It will be set up somewhere in the center of town, on Nevsky Avenue, let's say. And there a UCCOC will be set up—a United City Can-Opening Center. It'll be very convenient. Let's say for example that you have guests at home and you need to open a can of sardines for them. You will need neither a can opener nor the least physical exertion. You simply take your can, dash outside and go to the UCCOC. There you'll give your can to the woman behind the counter, pay five kopeks, and receive a receipt. The woman will paste a label on your can and put it on a conveyer belt. And you will go out and take a seat in the waiting room and watch a short film clip about canning and preserving. Soon you'll

be called to the window, where you'll show your receipt and receive your opened can. Then you'll go calmly back home to Vasilevsky Island. Convenient, don't you agree?"

"You don't mean that this project will actually be put into effect?" Lusya asked.

"Petya hopes so," Sveta replied. "But lately he's attracted a lot of enemies and spiteful critics. They try to prevent his inventions from being realized. They're envious, it seems. But Petya doesn't envy anyone; he knows that he's extraordinary. And he's a righteous person. There's one other inventor whom he highly respects—that's the one who invented and introduced into manufacture the bottle cap Drink It Up."

"And what is that?"

"You haven't noticed how vodka bottles are capped these days?! There's this cap of soft metal with a little tail. When you pull on the tail, the metal tears and the bottle is opened. The cap can't be reused to close the bottle back up, and so whether you want to or not—you've got to drink it up. That's also a daringly innovative technological idea."

"I still like those water skates best of all," Lusya said pensively. "How I'd like to race across the bay on skates like those some bright summer night!"

"You've got an obsession with those skates," Sveta snorted. "You couldn't even pay Petya and me to take them."

Sergei switched off his IPRU and fell to thinking once again. And he came to a decision.

5

That very evening Sergei Kladezev found his pair of water skates at the bottom of an old suitcase. He filled the bath tub with water and tried the skates out. They hadn't lost their buoyancy and could glide just as well as they had many years ago.

After that he went to his workroom and sat up late into the night making a second pair of water skates for Lusya.

On the next day, Sunday, Sergei went out for his morning walk and found Tamara gone when he returned. He discovered yet another rug—one with a deer—missing from the wall. Tamara had gone to see the retired director again.

Sergei put on his grey suit and wrapped both pairs of water skates up in a newspaper. Then he put a spray bottle containing MESTR—Multiple-Effect Surface Tension Reinforcer—in his pocket. Clothing sprayed with this compound would allow the wearer to remain suspended indefinitely upon the water's surface.

Then Sergei opened the large cabinet where he kept his best inventions and pulled out a SPOSED (Special-Purpose Optical Solar-Energy Device). He had put much thought into this device at one time and considered it his most important invention. He had perfected it two years ago, but had never put it into operation. The thing was that the SPOSED could restore a person's youth, and all this time Sergei had never had the slightest desire to return to his youth—that would mean that

he would have to make Tamara young again too, and start life over again with her. And as far as he was concerned, the portion of his life that he had already spent with her was more than sufficient. In addition, he had always been concerned about the device's extraordinary level of power consumption. Its operation would be accompanied by certain phenomena on a cosmic scale, and Sergei considered himself too insignificant a person to be the cause of these phenomena.

Now, however, after thoroughly weighing the situation, he decided to employ the SPOSED. And so he took the SPOSED together with the water skates and left his apartment.

He walked along his street and soon came out onto Central Avenue. On the corner of the Fifth Line he bought a bottle of champagne and a box of chocolates and continued on his way. When he reached the Eleventh Line he turned off of Central Avenue and in a short time found himself in front of the building in which Lusya lived. He climbed the familiar staircase to her apartment and rang at her door—two long rings followed by one short.

The door was opened by Lusya.

"Hello, Lusya!" he said. "How long it's been!.."

"Ages!.." Lusya replied. "But for some reason I always knew you would come. And you did."

They walked into Lusya's room and were soon sipping champagne and reminiscing about old times.

"Oh, what I wouldn't give to be young once more and start life over again!" Lusya suddenly exclaimed.

"That's in our power," Sergei said and placed the SPOSED on the table. The SPOSED was the size of a portable radio and had a rather thick cord extending from it.

"Does it plug into the wall outlet? Are you sure it won't blow a fuse?" Lusya asked. "Our building was just converted to two hundred and twenty volts."

"No, the SPOSED doesn't work from an outlet," Sergei replied. "A thousand hydroelectric power stations wouldn't be enough in this case. It takes its power directly from the sun. Could you open the window, please?"

Lusya flung open the window, and Sergei took the small concave mirror at the end of the cord and placed it on the windowsill so that it was directed towards the sun.

Then he walked over to the SPOSED and pressed on the button.

Something inside the device began to make a crackling noise, and all at once the sun's brilliance began to dim—like a lightbulb when there's a loss of voltage in the electrical circuit. Twilight penetrated the room.

Lusya walked over to the window and glanced out at the city.

"What's happening, Sergei?!" she exclaimed in astonishment. "It looks like an eclipse is underway. All of Vasilevsky Island is in darkness. And beyond, as far as the eye can see."

"Right now it's dark all over the Earth, and on Mars and Venus as well," Sergei replied. "This device takes a lot of energy."

"You could never put this into mass production," Lusya said. "If everyone started to make themselves young again it would be dark all the time."

"That's right," Sergei said. "This device is not meant to be used more than once. I custom-designed it expressly for you. And now let's sit and wait quietly."

They sat down on the old plush couch and began to wait. It grew increasingly dark in the room. Outside the cars all had their headlights on.

"It's hard to believe that it's only one o'clock in the afternoon," Lusya said dreamily. "It's so strange..."

"Yes, it probably does seem strange," Sergei replied. "Only not to me. A great expenditure of energy is required in order to restore youth."

Meanwhile it had grown as dark as night all around. The windows of apartment buildings were lit up, and street lamps were glowing. It was now totally dark in the room. Only the cord stretching from the small mirror on the windowsill to the SPOSED glowed with a bluish light. It quivered and writhed like a hose through which some sort of liquid was flowing at a tremendous speed.

All of a sudden there was a sharp click inside the device, and a rectangular window appeared on its side. Through this window projected a beam of greenish light. It terminat-

ed abruptly, as though it had been chopped off, and resembled matter. But it was light. This beam of light began to grow and projected against the wall where a picture hung of a pig beneath an oak tree—an illustration to the well-known fable. The pig was instantly transformed into a piglet, and the spreading oak—into a young sapling.

The beam began moving slowly and hesitatingly around the room, as if it was searching blindly for Lusya and Sergei. In the spot where it touched the wall the old, faded wallpaper regained its former colour and became like new. The old grey cat dozing on top the chest of drawers turned into a kitten and began to play with its tail. A fly fell into the path of the beam and dropped to the floor, transformed into a maggot.

Finally the beam drew near Sergei and Lusya. It slid across their heads, their faces, their torsos and legs. Two shining semicircles, like halos, appeared above their heads.

"Oh, my head is tickling!" Lusya exclaimed laughing.

"Don't get alarmed," Sergei said. "Your grey hairs are turning into normal ones. My head is tickling too."

"Ah!" Lusya cried. "There's something hot in my mouth!"

"Do you have gold caps on your teeth?" Sergei asked.

"Just two," Lusya answered.

"Healthy teeth don't need caps, and so they're disintegrating into dust," Sergei explained. "Just blow out the dust."

Lusya formed an "O" with her lips the way unexperienced smokers do and blew the gold dust out of her mouth.

"It feels like the couch is rising up beneath us," she said suddenly.

"Those are the springs straightening themselves up. We're getting lighter, you know. We put on a bit of weight over all these years."

"You're right, Sergei," Lusya agreed. "But right now I feel as light as a feather. Just like when I was twenty years old."

"You are twenty years old right now," Sergei said. "We're young again."

At that instant the SPOSED suddenly began to vibrate and hum loudly. The next instant there was a brilliant burst of light, and all that remained of the SPOSED was a pile of blue ashes. It immediately began to grow light all around. The drivers turned off their headlights, the street lamps and lights in the windows also went out—they were no longer needed. The sun shone once again with all its June brilliance.

* * *

Lusya stood up, looked at herself in the mirror, and smiled.

"Let's go out for a walk somewhere, Sergei," she said. "We could go to Yelagin Island."

Sergei grabbed the bundle with the water skates, took Lusya by the arm, and they walked out of the apartment and skipped lightly down the steps and out onto the street. On Central Avenue they caught up with a tram already pulling away from the stop and rode

it to Central Park. There they strolled around, rode on the carousel, swung on the swings, and lunched two times in the park restaurant.

Late that evening when the park grew quiet and deserted, they walked out onto the shore of the gulf. It was the time of the White Nights, and it was as bright as day all around. The water was tranquil and calm, and in the distance, near Volny Island, loomed the motionless sails of yachts.

"Perfect weather for water skating," Sergei said, and he unwrapped the bundle and pulled out the skates. He helped Lusya put them on over her shoes and then put on his own pair of skates.

Lusya stepped out onto the water of the gulf and began to glide along easily. They passed the yachts, waved to the yachtsmen waiting for a wind, and glided past Volny Island out to the open expanse of the gulf. They skated for a long time until Sergei suddenly slowed his pace. Lusya skated over to him.

"You know, Lusya, there's something I have to tell you..." Sergei began timidly.

"I know," Lusya replied. "I love you too. From now on we'll be together always."

They embraced, and kissed, and turned back towards the shore.

Meanwhile the wind had picked up and was raising up waves which made skating difficult.

"What if I stumble and fall into the water?" Lusya asked.

"Now I'll take measures to make sure we won't drown," Sergei said with a laugh.

He pulled the spray bottle of MESTR out of his pocket and sprayed the compound on his and Lusya's clothing.

"Now we can even sit on the waves," he said to Lusya.

And they sat on a wave, as if upon a crystal bench, and embraced, and the wave carried them to shore.

Citizens! Look forward to great discoveries!

MIKHAIL YEMTSEV,
YEREMEI PARNOV

THE SNOWBALL

In my wallet, I carry my passport, my work ID, and several booklets of different colors with stamps to signify that I have paid my dues to the various organizations of which I am a member. But I myself am a ghost, an ephemerid. I should never have to walk along a snow-covered path, breathing air pungent as spirits of ammonia. The most rightless of the rightless, one deprived of all the benefits of life and cast into the darkest dungeon forever, has more rights than I. Infinitely more!

That is my opinion on the matter, but I do not always agree with myself. I am too accustomed to the world around me for that—I know it far too well. The branches of the trees are swollen with frost and resemble the fuzzy antlers of young deer. The electric wires

are barely visible against the background of the almost colorless sky. They are presently thick and white as Manila hemp rope. On the roof of the Moscow University physics building, antennae are freezing in the dim twilight. They look like the masts of some ghostly frigate. From the chemistry building comes the strange smell—I can't decide if it's pleasant or utterly disgusting—of elementary organic ethers. The familiar quotidian world! I get a lump in my throat whenever memories of it come to mind, and in my ears are whispered the words:

All dreams, all unreality,
Are mirrored in banality,
In days forever gone.

Yesterday, it was summer still, but today it is already winter. How many lies are contained in the seemingly straightforward word "yesterday". No, it wasn't yesterday after all...

I didn't have a coat. Or more precisely, my coat was hanging in some cloakroom, but the ticket I need to retrieve it was in some stranger's pocket. And there's another lie for you: the word "stranger". It's not exactly "stranger" I mean, but they haven't yet invented a word for what I want to say.

I was walking fast so I won't freeze. I'd manage without my coat somehow. I used to run quite often without a coat through the snow from the chemistry department to the main building.

Suddenly I stopped dead in my tracks with a start and shivered, for I had almost stepped

into the path of an enormous truck. The driver rolled down at the window, and along with the pearly steam of his breath, the prickly air was rent by his eloquent and intricate curses.

I laughed uproariously—what a fool this truck driver was! After all, I was nothing but an apparition. Just let him try to squash me! His lawyer wouldn't have a very hard time defending him. You can't kill what doesn't exist in the first place.

There's always some sort of nonsense or other floating around in my head. I try not to forget myself or allow myself to be distracted. I must remember constantly that I am alien—that I do not belong here.

A group of students dressed in bright colors was headed my way. They were proud and carefree like the Three Musketeers after one of their victories over the Cardinal's Guardsmen. They were waddling a bit as they laughed loudly and bragged shamelessly.

"So what questions did they ask you, Penguin?" a tall foppishly dressed fellow asked, turning to a short, shaggy-haired carrot-top.

"A piece of cake! Absorption, Langmür's isothermals, electric double layer, and the double structure model of water... I could have passed that exam with one arm tied behind my back..."

"So they've just had their physical chemistry exam," I noted mentally and slowed my pace.

"Just look at what I'm wearing," continued the carrot-topped lad, pulling his scarf back to reveal the collar of a navy blue shirt with

white pinstripes. "I can't imagine how it's stayed in one piece all these years. I wear it for all my exams, and I always pass them. This is my lucky shirt, fellows! And my suit is really old, too. I've had it since high school."

At these words, I felt a dull melancholy envy.

I had reached the majestic pink marble stairway that led to the front entrance of the main building. Canadian firs powdered with snow solemnly spread out to either side of the entrance. The bald marble pate of the eminent Butlerov was covered with a coquettish cap of snow.

From force of habit, I fished into my pocket for my ID.

My heart skipped a beat and sank.

I greeted the doorlady with exaggerated exuberance, flashed my ID right under her nose, and made a bee-line for the elevator.

The poor lady! If only she had seen the expiration date stamped in my ID!

The red light went on, and the elevator doors would be opening any minute. I decided it would be better if I didn't go to the fourth floor. What would happen if I met him and someone saw us together? The very thought made my blood run cold.

There was no question of going home. That would be too hard on the parents. They weren't supposed to know about anything, after all. If I met him, we would have to agree about everything right away.

I even laughed when I thought of him. Humor is probably proportional to the unfam-

iliarity and unnaturalness of the situation. Just imagine—such a transition had taken place instantaneously! Or in any case, instantaneously from a subjective point of view. But what about objectively? How much time had passed since the moment I pulled off the black drape at my dissertation defense?

* * *

My theoretical premises did not raise any particular objections from those present. Naturally, my major professor gave my work a glowing review. And my official opponents objected only to a few minor details here and there.

One of these opponents, Professor Posokhin, spent absolutely ages wiping his glasses with his handkerchief. Finally, he huffed on the lenses and wheezed. Slowly, squeaking like an ungreased wheel all the while, he muttered something, glancing down at a sheet of paper. No one gave a hoot how many chapters the dissertation had, how many pages or diagrams there were, or how many Soviet or foreign references were to be found in the bibliography. The members of the Academic Council had already evaluated the dissertation mentally and listened with obvious boredom to the tiresome and pedantic professor.

From time to time, I made notes, jotting down the occasional phrase. I still had to reply to his criticism. At long last, Professor Posokhin ended his exposition with the sacramental phrases:

"However, my criticism of the deficiencies

of the given dissertation in no way diminishes its significance. It meets in every way the demands placed upon such a work, and the author undoubtedly deserves to be granted his Ph. D. in math and physics."

The Chairman of the Academic Council, Professor Valentinov, a tall handsome man with a shock of aluminium-colored hair, coughed imposingly and asked:

"Shall the candidate reply to both of his opponents at once or in turn?"

"Both at once!" rang out the voices of the members of the Academic Council, who were bored to tears with the monotonous procedure of dissertation defenses.

"Well, in that case," said Valentinov with the captivating smile of a lord who had just been decorated with the Order of the Garter, "we shall ask our honored guest, Samson Ivanovich Gogotseridze, to take his place at the podium."

Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences Gogotseridze, a dashing Georgian, raced to the podium as if he were mounted on one of his people's legendary steeds of yore. Though he gazed fiercely about the auditorium, he didn't scare anyone, for Gogotseridze was the kindliest of men. Then he launched immediately into his objections, firing words rapidly like machine-gun rounds:

"The thorough and insightful analysis given by our respected colleague, Professor Sergei Alexandrovich Posokhin, relieves me of the necessity of giving a detailed review of the dissertation of our respected Viktor Arkadie-

vich." (There followed an approving nod in my direction.) "Therefore, I shall touch upon a few of the work's flaws. There are only a few, mind you, and they drown in the sea of overwhelmingly positive material in which this dissertation abounds."

Gogotseridze took a deep breath and wiped his red face with a snow-white handkerchief.

"Mind you, I shall not speak of the many virtues of this work but will rather dwell briefly on the defects."

This "brief" discourse dragged on for seventeen minutes. I had already begun to get nervous, but my major professor gave a surreptitious wink of encouragement in my direction, and I calmed down. Having listed all the dissertation's flaws, Gogotseridze downed a glass of mineral water and pronounced the traditional closing that despite the deficiencies, the dissertation was in keeping with, and the candidate deserved, and so on and so forth.

I rose to respond to their criticisms. Since neither of my opponents had attacked the body of the work itself but had rather objected to minor and inconsequential details, I decided not to be petty myself. I spent a good five minutes thanking absolutely everyone who had helped me in the process of writing my dissertation. This was about the most important thing which remained to be done at that point—God forbid I should forget anyone! Then I bowed and scraped to my opponents, promising to take all their objec-

tions into consideration in my further work, and in general to make their invaluable advice the guiding principles of my life.

My major professor nodded approvingly at the tact of my remarks. Everything was going extremely well.

Then Professor Valentinov asked if anyone had any comments. However, it was obvious that no one was eager to speak. Finally, one of the members of the Academic Council rose and said something as if carrying out his appointed duty, then sat back down. Then someone else spoke in abstractions for about five minutes, noting that young scholars such as I were badly needed. He said my dissertation was written on a much higher level than that required for the Ph. D.

Then suddenly I heard the question for which I had waited so long; it was asked by a young woman I did not know. She began:

"I followed very carefully the part of Viktor Arkadievich's summary where he justifies theoretically the possibility of displacement along the time vector. I even underlined that section in the abstract. I am very curious to know about the premises for experimental verification of that effect."

That was just the question I had been dying to answer! My major professor and I had foreseen this pitfall and prepared a marvelous reply more than a month before. He wouldn't let me breathe a word about the fact that our apparatus was already completed. That might have harmed my defense. Everyone would have shown a sudden interest and

demanded that I explain how and why it worked. I finally managed to convince my professor that we should bring the apparatus to the auditorium where my defense would take place. We concealed it with a black drape. There was no way of telling beforehand: perhaps it would come in handy. We were the masters of our own fates, after all.

When the young lady asked her question, my major professor smiled, nodded in the direction of the apparatus, and pressed his finger to his lips in a gesture of silence. I winked at him: after all, I had no intention of being my own worst enemy.

I rose to answer the questions, intending to gleam with erudition yet another time. I blurted out several neutral phrases, thanked those who had spoken, and proceeded to answer the final question. In essence, it was the only genuine question which had been asked, and the only one worth answering.

Then I caught sight of that young woman's eyes: they were the color of dark honey with sparks of gold—attentive and serious. Sir Lancelot mounted his steed with a flourish. Don Quixote brandished his lance at the blades of the windmill.

I have no idea how it happened, but I walked over to my apparatus, jerked off the cover, and said in a hollow voice:

"Voilà!.."

There was total silence in the auditorium. I tried not to look at my major professor. The flash of inspiration passed, and I realized I had made a stupid mistake, indeed. But there

was no way to retreat gracefully, so I took up the attack headlong.

"This experimental model is not very powerful, so I can only send myself a few months into the past. I will do that now. When I disappear, I ask you all to stay in your seats. Under no circumstances must you stand in the place where this apparatus is now located... I'll be back soon."

Everyone in the room was waiting with bated breath. I walked over to the switchboard and turned on my apparatus. With zombielike motions, I donned the crystal headband, took off my jacket, rolled up my sleeves, and put the copper contacts on my wrists. Then I pressed the button. The last thing I saw was Professor Valentinov with his mouth wide open. In his hands was the appointment book bound in elaborately ornamented leather which he had bought in South America.

* * *

The auditorium was cold and dimly lit. I took off the crystal headband, turned the dial to zero, and switched off my apparatus. Then I looked around. The windows glowed with an opalescent light, for they were covered with whimsical patterns of hoarfrost. Vague patches of light were frozen on the empty benches before me. The high ceiling was shrouded in darkness.

I walked over to the doors and tugged on them. They were locked. What rotten luck! That might spoil everything. It would be useless and even dangerous to raise a ruckus, since all

the rooms of the university were sealed shut for the night. Should I sit quietly till morning? But would the people I had left in the future still be waiting for me when I got back?..

I could do nothing but philosophically ponder the nature of time and curse myself for having been such a fool. Or perhaps I should have been rejoicing in my success...

I wondered what time it was. There was a clock somewhere above the blackboard. I thought I could make out the dim reflection of the round glass. I tried to remember where the light switch was. Strange as it might seem, no matter how often I had been in that auditorium, day or night, I had never noticed where the light switch was located.

I walked over to the wall, pressed my body against it, and began to make my way around the perimeter of the room. Finally I hit upon the switch. It was right next to the door. Why hadn't I figured that out for myself?

The light came on. According to the clock, the time was 4:27. Four hours remained till the start of the working day—unless it was a Sunday, of course. I decided to wait, so I turned out the light and went to the rear of the auditorium where I stretched out on the very last bench. When the cleaning woman came in the morning, she wouldn't notice me. I had slept in the auditorium plenty of times before!

But it was different then. Some lecturer was mumbling something from the podium, and there were students all around. Some were taking notes on the lecture, others were

playing tic-tac-toe and a few were whispering. As for me, I was sleeping.

I tossed and turned on the hard bench for ages. What rotten luck! Why hadn't I at least taken my jacket with me?! I was wearing only a thin nylon shirt with rolled-up sleeves. The gears in my head were turning so fast I couldn't sleep.

As soon as the auditorium was opened in the morning, I would have to slip unnoticed into the laboratory—before my colleagues arrived, and particularly before he got there. I would try to change into the old training suit I generally wore when I was performing experiments. It was hanging in my locker next to my white lab coat. It was a good thing my wallet with all my money was in my pants pocket rather than in the jacket. I was already hungry, so I would surely be famished by morning. What *would* happen in the morning anyway? I was almost afraid to think.

...Everything happened as I figured it would. By crawling under the tables, I managed to avoid the watchful gaze of Katya the cleaning woman, who was mumbling something under her breath as she swept the floor down with damp sawdust. I slipped into the corridor. I wasn't at all worried about my apparatus. Our students have been carefully taught not to touch anything, and the research workers would never think of messing around with an unfamiliar apparatus, particularly if there was a warning to that effect posted on the outside.

I changed and raced down the stairs. I had

decided to go to the chemistry department where I knew fewer people and would find it easier to figure out all the implications of my present situation. Running along the second-floor corridor, I glanced into the half-opened door of the reading room. No one was there. I tiptoed across the rug to the windowsill which was covered with pots of cacti and agaves. The morning noises of the city floated in through the window. The tall chimneys were shrouded in smoke, trolleys were rolling across the bridge, and people were rushing to work. That was all reality—just as objective a reality as I myself was.

All the tables in the reading room were occupied. Teachers and graduate students had left their briefcases, folders, notebooks, scraps of paper with scribbles, and pens everywhere. In a few minutes, they would return to their work, which had been interrupted. On one of the professors' tables, I noticed something which made me start: it was Professor Valentinov's appointment book bound in yellow leather decorated with colored ancient Aztec hieroglyphs. There, he wrote down everything he had to do the next day. I quickly leafed through the pages that had been written on. The last notations were for the eleventh of December. "That means today is the eleventh, and he wrote all this down yesterday," I decided, because under this particular date was written:

1. Call Nikolai Andreyevich about Astangova.

2. 11:30-13:20—Lecture for third year students.

3. 14:00—Academic Council.

4. 17:00—Graduate students.

Yes, today was the eleventh of December... More than seven months before my dissertation defense.

And just then, I had a brilliant idea. I looked around to see if there was anyone standing in the doorway, quickly slipped the appointment book into my pocket, and rushed out of the room.

...In the chemistry department, examination fever reigned supreme. Everyone was rushing about in a state of total nervous anxiety. Laughing groups of students who had passed their exams came running down the staircases. Even the doorladies were caught up in the general insanity.

"You'll never pass if you don't study," said one of them as she wound a ball of yarn. "My daughter puts her textbooks under her pillow and hides five-kopeck pieces in her slippers, but despite all that, if she doesn't study, she practically fails."

The elevator doors hissed open in front of me, but still I couldn't figure out what I should do. The doors shut noisily, the buzzer sounded, and the elevator left without me in response to a signal from some other floor. I decided to wait for the start of the working day and give him a call before he'd had time to go to the chemistry department or anywhere else.

* * *

The coin fell into the steel throat of the pay phone. A coquettish female voice purred:

"Hell-o?"

I swallowed hard, for from force of habit, I almost said, "Hello, Raisa. It's me, Viktor."

"Hello-o?!" she repeated.

"Could I speak with Viktor Arkadievich, please," I said, licking my parched lips.

She put the receiver down on the glass that covered her desk top. I heard the characteristic sound, and moreover, I knew perfectly well where Raisa always put the receiver. Everything was quiet, but from time to time, I caught fragments of conversations muted by their distance from the phone. Then I heard steps. The broad, confident steps of a man. It was nice to know he had such a stride. Then a duet—the click of spike heels tapping slightly after his. I strained my ears.

"If I didn't know you were right here, Viktor Arkadievich," flew Raisa's soprano from some great distance, as if from another planet, "I would swear it was you playing tricks on me. His voice is exactly like yours."

"Hello, this is Viktor Arkadievich," said a man.

And what do you think—that voice was unfamiliar and unpleasant to me. But then I remembered how my voice sounded on tape and calmed down. It's difficult to recognize one's own voice. It takes a bit of getting used to.

"Viktor Arkadievich," I said, trying to take deep, calm breaths. "Please don't interrupt me, and try to answer as concisely as possible. The main thing is not to be surprised or worried... I have something extremely important on my hands, and no one except

you and me must know about it. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't understand. Who's this?"

"Viktor Arkadievich, you are planning an experiment on the motion of macrosystems along the time vector," I said, deciding to lay all my cards on the table.

"Who is this?!"

"Please calm down. We must meet. Then you'll understand everything. I'll explain it all in person..."

He probably thought I was a blackmailer or a spy.

"Why don't you want to identify yourself?" he asked, his voice seething with overt irritation.

"You don't know me. You don't know me at all! I found out quite by chance about your plans—absolutely by chance. I'm working on exactly the same problem as you. But... I've run into some problems. My experiment has not been successful, and I really need your help."

The breathing on the other end grew more rapid, and I was mentally excited—he had taken the bait, it seemed! My ploy was working—and why shouldn't it? After all, I knew him as well as... As well as one could know oneself.

"Don't you find this all a little bit peculiar?" he finally asked.

"No, not at all. Everything is absolutely normal. I am only asking to meet with you in person. Nothing more. If you were a young lady, such reservations might be in order: he

implores, she resists... But you are by no means a young lady and cannot refuse my request. You don't have the right to turn me down, and that is that!"

"Why do you think so?"

I hadn't expected him to ask such an idiotic question.

"Why do I think so?" I asked again. "If for no other reason than that, 'I knew her like one does oneself alone, I wait until she is my very own.' "

"OK. Let's meet, then. Wherever it's convenient for you... How will we recognize each other?"

"Oh, don't worry! We'll recognize each other in any crowd the very first second."

I broke off abruptly. There was no reason to push him too far. He didn't like that at all, but it was already too late.

"What do you mean by that?" he inquired, a note of mistrust appearing in his voice once more.

That dark blue evening he remembers,
Keeps alive its fire and fans the embers.
Though bound to his path like a quarry slave,
He strains at his chains, his freedom to save.

I quoted a verse from a poem he had written while still a university student. He had never shown it to anyone.

There was a lengthy silence on the other end.

"So where shall we meet and at what time?" he asked at last.

What a great guy! I had had no idea he was so wonderful! He was terribly anxious just then, I knew, but what a calm voice! How dispassionate he sounded!

"Are you free this evening?"

"Yes, but only until seven."

I wondered what his plans were... It was surely something important: otherwise he would have dropped everything for me. After all, I knew quite well what an impossible curious person he was.

"What about right after work? Will Mama be at home, or will she be gone somewhere?"

I wanted to say "your mama", but I couldn't force myself to do it, so I just said "Mama".

"Come at five, then. You know where I live, I'm sure..."

"Yes, of course."

"Somehow I knew you would."

"See you at five then. Thanks. Goodbye! You're really a great guy, you know!"

* * *

Neither one of us could get over the shock. I looked at my apartment and rested my gaze on each individual item in it. Every single thing was interesting to me. The wallpaper and the pictures I had painted. My books and the sculptures made by a friend of mine. As if I were witnessing some major miracle, I gazed at mother's sewing machine with its crocheted cover and at the television, the screen of which was partially blocked by the fluffy tail of my old tabby cat, who was calmly napping in his customary place atop

the TV. I could find practically no changes, but perhaps that was because I had left only the day before. But the day before, my apartment had been seven months older than it was now!

Nothing amazed me more than my own apartment. Perhaps that was because he was in it. He? I said "he" as if I were talking about some person distinct from myself... And in case of fact, he was a discrete and separate entity! But which of us was more real, he or I? Which of us was in his proper place?

"I imagine we are both thinking the same thing right now, you and I," he said with a forced smile.

"Probably so... After all we're even closer to each other than a pair of identical twins."

"Yes, the devil take it all! I can't get it straight in my mind... Wait a minute... You and I—well, the two of us are one and the same person under conditions of displacement in time. But simultaneously, we can exist only separately—as discrete entities. Do you get the gist of it?"

"So why are you telling me? Isn't that a bit like the egg trying to tell the chicken what life is all about?"

"Hold on a minute. Can't we do without all this?" he exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with merriment. "After all, I was the one who worked out the method for displacement into the past. You were simply the guinea pig, and nothing more."

I collapsed onto the nearest chair from shock at such obnoxiousness, but after I'd

thought the matter through carefully, I realized what he had said was eminently reasonable. Moreover, I figured out a way to turn his own argument against him. He wanted to say something else, but I beat him to the draw:

"Hold your horses, old man! That just won't do," I intoned, squashing the phrase that was forming in his mouth. "We have to shoot in turn... I heard your shot, sir. And we shall consider that your bullet grazed my epaulette. But now it's my shot. Do you know, my narcissistic young man, that the idea is not yours at all? And you can just leave off waving your hands! Your objections are not subject to appeal, in my humble opinion. The idea was not mine, I agree, but neither was it yours! It occurred to that person who was younger than you by a year and younger than me by nineteen months... So how does it feel to eat crow? One to nothing in my favor! You're dead, sir. And may the Almighty accept the soul of this, His humble sinner, into His keeping, for a good man he was."

He burst out laughing—he was a great guy, after all. I was falling head over heels in love with him. Oh, if we could only remain bifurcated like this forever! I had always dreamed of having a brother! But he wasn't my brother, and there was no way he ever could be...

"I see you haven't grown completely senile with old age. You're still on the ball!" he exclaimed, patting me on the shoulder. "An excellent thought, that. It would be well

worth developing... Where is the apparatus?"

"In the auditorium of the physics department. So what?"

"The angle of inversion I built into it is four-hundredths of a second. Are you sure you set the dial correctly?"

"I made—I mean you made—a mistake in your calculations. Indefinite-infinity didn't open up on infinity as precisely as it should have."

"But what was wrong with the calculations precise? They were done precisely according to Lopitaile's rule."

"The only problem is, it's inapplicable here. I used Ferstman's method and got an angle of fifty-two thousandths."

"But that doesn't make any difference... The apparatus is for one person only. What a pity!"

"What's a pity?"

"If, at the very moment the idea came to me, or that is, to him, or more precisely, when the idea came to all of us, we could have... Do you get my point?"

"Great! A wonderful idea! Then there would have been three of us! Like the three musketeers!"

"Or more precisely: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit! The Three in One."

"Working with you is a lot of fun!" I exclaimed, staring insatiably at his face, trying to perceive the irretrievable changes which the march of time had made in me.

"It's nice to work with you, too," he said

with a note of tenderness in his voice. He was staring at me just as hard as I was staring at him. Naturally! I was what he would become in seven months! Anyone would be interested in what he or she would look like in the future!

We fell silent. I didn't think this meeting would shake me up so much. I had imagined that I would be totally different—that I would be a flickering ambassador from the future, wise and glimmering. I thought I would didactically proffer advice, and that "his" mouth would open wide in amazement. His eyes would roll back in his head as he swooned from shock. But that's not how it was at all! And this was only natural, only natural. Reality, as always, proved to be as simple and stunning as imaginable. Mother Nature was wisest of all! Our high-flown hypotheses meant nothing to Her.

"Listen, old man, shouldn't we have a bite to eat?" he inquired, breaking the silence first.

"Those are the first sensible words I've heard from you. What have you got for dinner?"

"Bean soup with sauteed onions. Hamburgers. I fry them three minutes on one side and three minutes on the other. I hope your tastes haven't changed."

He fell silent, realizing his momentary lapse of tact.

My mouth started to water. I was devilishly hungry.

"Oh yes," he continued. "There's some fruit compote and a can of abalones."

"Abalones! In what kind of sauce?" I cried with excitement.

"Dill sauce," he replied, a bit surprised. "Did you ever buy abalones before?"

"No. I got it for the first time today at the university grocery store. I thought I'd try it. So what's the matter?"

"Oh, it's nothing..."

I remembered the day I had bought the can of abalones and brought it home. Just like today, Mama had gone off somewhere, and I had eaten supper alone. I was in a hurry, since I had a date. I balanced the can on the edge of the counter, and it slipped and fell as I was opening it. The white dill sauce splattered all over my new trousers.

I glanced surreptitiously at his trousers. They were just like new, and the crease was straight as an arrow. My own trousers were a bit worn after seven months, and upon close examination, a faint spot from the dill sauce was visible above the left knee.

"Oh well, it looks like he's about to do the same thing I did. He's opening the can just as hurriedly, balancing it on the edge of the counter," I thought with almost malicious glee.

Just then, I wondered whether or not I ought actively to interfere in human history to make it just a little bit better. But mature thinking prompted me that I should not do anything. That seemingly insignificant act would have been totally irresponsible in fact, and was allowable only in some science fiction novel. Interfering with the process of history was impermissible, especially since the

consequences of such an action were absolutely unpredictable.

So there would be grease spots all over the pants of that exceedingly neat young man!

"Doggone it!" he whispered, catching on his left knee the half-opened can of sweet abalones that tasted like tender crabs.

As I recalled, I had cursed in just that fashion at the time.

The cat opened its left eye but saw no dogs about, so it narrowed the eye to a slanted slit and continued its nap.

Despite it all, we tried the abalones. He ate his portion before having his soup, but I ate mine only after devouring the hamburgers. Then we opened up the castro-convertible sofa so we could stretch out full-length to enjoy a smoke. We reclined without taking off our shoes. Our habits were identical. It seemed I hadn't changed with time.

I blew smoke rings with great satisfaction. We were silent. I noticed that he kept sneaking glances at his watch.

"You said you were only free until seven. Where are you going? If it's not a secret, of course."

"How could I have any secrets from you?"

"You are forgetting the weakness of the human memory. A person has a tendency to forget, after all. And once you've forgotten something, it's the same as never having known it at all. Therefore, if it's not a secret..."

"Nonsense. I've got a date with Irina. We're supposed to meet at the Kaluzhskaya Metro Station by the pay phones."

"With Irina?!"

"Don't try to tell me you don't remember her? Now that's a fine kettle of fish... So how is she getting along there in the future? Or did you break up with her already?.."

His pitiful attempt at a joke made me feel uneasy. It jarred my memory to the extent that I finally recalled what day it was.

And that abstract date—the eleventh of December—was suddenly filled with bitter memories.

* * *

That evening, I had waited for Irina by the pay phones. People went into the booths to make their calls, talked awhile, then left. They arranged meetings, laughed, tried to convince, or even implored. The steam from my breathing was illuminated by the street lamp. It was reddish with a hint of a rainbow. The large amber eye overhead that was the face of the clock outside the metro stared at me without blinking. She was already three minutes late. The minute hand was motionless for a long time, then jumped suddenly to the next marker. And in resonance with it, something in my heart jumped, too.

I caught sight of her when she was still some distance away. She was crossing the street in a hurry. Little blizzards whirled round her fur boots. Tiny fires burned in her eyes, but I did not trust them. She was cold as powdered snow inside one's shirt collar, tall and stunningly beautiful.

She was distant. Oh, so very distant.

And that prompted me to confess everything to her. I could tell she didn't love me, but I didn't want to—I couldn't—believe it. I chased away all such thoughts, and in so doing rushed the course of events. She liked me and was never bored in my company. So I should have kept it on that level: joking around with her rather than paling with passionate love. If I had been a bit colder, a bit less caring, who knows how things might have turned out... She was used to having men swoon at her feet and liked to march from one victory on to the next. She was curious yet somehow indifferent.

And she didn't want to be in control but rather to feel someone else's power over her, to feel a tender submission in the face of someone else's calmness and self-assured strength.

I understood all that quite well but could do nothing with myself. I was madly in love and therefore totally disarmed. There was no way she could do anything but win. I was overwhelmingly outnumbered.

And that day was my defeat.

I confessed everything to her.

How could she respond to me? What could she offer me in return?

Friendship?

She realized I was not one to submit to the victor and become his slave. Perhaps she wanted to keep me nearby in the role of a rejected suitor, but she realized nothing would come of that.

She did not offer me friendship. Neither

did she say she "didn't know what she felt" or that she had to "sort out her emotions". She carried herself extremely well.

The challenge had been made, and she knew she had to respond. Perhaps she regretted that I had rushed things so. I don't know. All she said was:

"No... I will always be glad to see you. Always," she added.

I realized everything was over. I didn't visit her any more or even phone. Neither did she call me.

We parted by the Crimea Bridge.

* * *

And now, in a brief hour or so, he would have to experience all that! All of it! Beginning with those three minutes of tardiness to the "no" by the Crimea Bridge. And I was just as sorry for him as I could be. Only then did I really feel that he was I, but that there were still many things he didn't know, much was as yet unrealized, and a lot of mistakes were as yet unmade. I wanted to shield him from the approaching pain, to protect him, to arm him with my experience. That was a very complex feeling.

And I wanted also to meet with her again, before the end that had come to our relationship. I would have won now. Everything would have been different. She would have been tortured by jealousy and doubts. She would have accused me of insensitivity. I would have made her fall in love with me.

Or perhaps it only seemed so.

Perhaps it was not in my power to change anything.

"Let me go in place of you!"

"Why?!" he asked, his face starting and growing cold.

"You don't know what awaits you today! You don't know her or yourself! Let me go! Just this once, just today... And then I'll disappear. You'll be grateful to me, you know. I want things to turn out differently for you than they did for me!"

"No, I don't want to know how things turned out for you."

"You have no idea of what happened. Irreparable demage will be done at today's meeting. I know, and I will tell you about it."

"No, don't do it!"

"You don't understand what I mean! OK. I won't go in place of you, but you should behave differently than I did then. It would be better if you didn't go at all. Wait until she calls you herself, for call she will."

"I don't want to listen to what you have to say! Do you understand? I don't want to!"

"But why? I just want to open your eyes to the truth. Not for my sake, but for your own!"

"Don't do it," he said hollowly. "Don't tell me anything about her. I don't need to know."

I looked into his eyes and realized that he already knew everything and understood it all with the sinking pain of his loving heart, just as I had once. He knew but didn't want

to believe it was true, just as I had then. And he couldn't change anything now any more than I could have then. He would go to meet her and tell her everything. I realized that perfectly well. I had had just such a mental dialog with myself at that point. And now he was talking about it with me. What was the difference?

From the cradle, a person wants to do everything for himself. To do and to experience, to err and get up after he has been knocked down, rubbing his bruises, but wiser for the lesson. And that is good.

"I think it would be better for me to go back."

"Yes, I imagine so... Will we ever meet again?"

I laughed.

"You will always be within me. And I... I will always be miles ahead of you. Your life is a race to catch up with me. We are out of sync."

"Will I disappear when you return to your own time?"

"No, we will simply merge into that elusive instant the name of which is the present. It is a point moving along a straight line from the past into the future. So shall we say farewell?"

"I'll go with you as far as the university."

"OK."

* * *

I wouldn't let go of his hand and gazed into his eyes for a long time. Our past helped us

know each other and ourselves, and that was extremely important.

"So long," I said.

"Till we meet again," he replied with a smile. "You will always return to me. We will surely meet again the next time you fall in love."

"Till we meet again," I said in assent.

I felt gloomy. I bent over and gathered some of the light, powdery snow in my hands. I squeezed it in my palms to make a hard, icy snowball. I was planning to throw the snowball at him. But for some reason, my eyes misted over, so I only waved my hand.

He smiled timidly.

I turned and pulled open the massive door.

I opened my eyes and touched the crystal headband. I glanced about the auditorium. Nothing had changed at all! Professor Valentinov hadn't even had time to close his mouth. The amber eyes of the young woman glowed with fright and admiration. My major professor was pale and terrible to behold. The whole scene was frozen: nothing moved or breathed. Any minute the door would open, and someone in a fireman's helmet would enter and announce: "The Inspector General is on his way!"

"Well?" Valentinov finally managed to wheeze.

I stared at him in incomprehension.

"We're waiting... Please, go ahead," he said.

"Excuse me, I don't quite understand what you mean," I said, for I had not yet come to my senses and really didn't know what he wanted from me.

"You promised to disappear..."

He was smiling. His wrinkles smoothed out. He came to his senses and once again became a Knight of the Order of the Garter.

"But wasn't I just... But wasn't I just gone for several hours?"

"No, not even for a second!" shouted someone. It seemed to be the young woman with the amber eyes.

There was so much mental anguish in her cry! Anguish for me and something else.

"What do you mean I didn't disappear?"

"No, you didn't disappear," announced the Lord with a smile, and the crows' feet around his eyes said: "Well, you've had your little joke on all of us now. It seems you're still wet behind the ears, young man..."

"I didn't disappear?.." I inquired again, removing the headband and turning off the dial.

Then I walked over to Valentinov and handed him the yellow appointment book with the Aztec design. There was exactly the same kind of book in the professor's hands.

"If you compare these two appointment books, Professor, you will see that they are absolutely identical, except that in the one I have in my hands, the last entry is for the eleventh of December of last year. And now it's June." I pointed at the window where a thick rain of poplar fluff was blowing past in the breeze.

For some reason, everyone looked out the window as if they all had their doubts that it was now June and not December.

"And here's something else!" I said, taking from my pocket the hard, frozen snowball, and heaving it with enormous pleasure at the blackboard covered from top to bottom with formulas.

The snowball hit dead in the center and stuck fast.

VIKTOR KOLUPAYEV

THE NEWSSTAND

1

The fog was so thick that nothing was visible twenty steps away. Only the electric lights and dim headlights of the cars cast hazily glimmering yellow blotches. Fifty below zero! The rare crunch of footsteps and the piercing honks of the cars, and the cold, the cold... Both in Ust-Mansk, and its suburbs, and for a thousand kilometers all around.

I was running from my hotel to the club of the electromechanical engineering factory, where a conference was scheduled to begin at twelve o'clock. I was running fast, because I was wearing light shoes and a fall coat, because the steam from my breath froze instantaneously on my face, and my nose was totally numb and I kept wanting to bury it beneath my armpit. And I also wanted the

cold to let up a bit so that I could take a look at my Ust-Mansk, go strolling through its new blocks, stop by and see one of my old friends, drink a bottle of beer and go to the city park, and then, like once long ago, slide down the snow bank and lose my hat, and find it filled with snow, and roar with laughter, and throw snowballs, and just let loose and have a grand old time. I wanted to see and do everything... Because it was ten years since I'd been to Ust-Mansk, and I'd lived the first twenty years of my life there.

I still had an hour and a half to spare. I wanted to be the first to arrive and get warm, and then stand there and watch as the others came tumbling into the foyer like frozen icicles together with clouds of steam, and stamped their feet and rubbed one another's cheeks.

"There's never a current newspaper at this stand," someone bundled from head to foot said irritably and almost knocked me down. "Excuse me."

I jumped aside and saw before me a newsstand of glass and plastic all covered with lacy spirals of sparkling hoarfrost. It was all lit up on the inside and looked like something out of a fairy-tale. I wondered how the old woman who sold the papers could sit there. Let's assume that it was ten degrees warmer inside. That would still make it forty below. Br-r! How in the world could she stand it? Maybe she was already frozen?

I decided to buy a paper so I would have

something constructive to do with my time during some of the reports. I tapped with frozen fingers on the window and it opened immediately.

"Grandma!" I shouted. "Five of today's editions. And give me one local."

"I'm not grandma. I'm Katya-Katyusha!" a girlish voice answered.

"Katya-Katyusha? Wonderful! Now what about the papers, Katya-Katyusha?" My lips had trouble forming the word "Katyusha", but I intentionally repeated it several times.

"I don't carry today's papers."

"So I've heard. But what do I need yesterday's for? I've already read them."

"I don't have yesterday's either."

"Then what are you sitting here for?"

"I sell only tomorrow's papers," the girl replied. Her face appeared in the window. "My God! Your cheeks are frost-bitten! You'd better rub them! Do you have far to go?"

"To the club of the electromechanical engineering..."

"You won't make it." Then, a bit slower, she added, "Come inside. It's warm here."

"Is it all right?"

"Of course! Come on in."

I tugged on the door of the stand but it wouldn't open, and I began to jump up and down, slapping my cheeks, elbows and knees. My toes were completely numb.

"Pull harder!" the girl shouted.

I pulled with all my might and squeezed inside the stand. There was barely room there

for one person and I stood there uncertainly, hunched over like a question mark.

"Sit down," the girl said, pointing to a stack of newspapers.

I sat down and moved my feet over towards the two electric heaters.

Inside the stand it was bright, warm, and dry. And also very clean and cozy.

"Your cheeks will turn black and the girls won't love you," she said, laughing. "Rub them."

I pulled off my gloves with my teeth and attempted to straighten out my fingers. They were frozen stiff.

"You're in a bad way," the girl said. She took off her mittens and cautiously placed her warm palms against my cheeks. When I made no effort to protest she asked, "Are you visiting here or are you one of those fashionable dandies who don't wear winter clothes and then wind up spending years in the hospital?"

"I'm visiting, Katya-Katyusha. I'm on my way to a conference... On the propagation of radio waves."

"Ah... I read about that in the paper." She rubbed my cheeks with her warm palms several more times. "They'll be okay now."

"Thank you, Katya. Let me introduce myself." I extended my still partially frozen hand. "Dmitry Yegorov."

She also held out her hand and for some reason laughed so gleefully that I had to chuckle myself.

"So they tore you apart at the conference?"

At first I didn't catch the meaning of her words.

"And I was still wondering which paper to keep. The only thing is, it's the same in all of them. So, you are Dmitry Yegorov, the irrational dreamer?"

"Katya, I'm not an irrational dreamer. On the contrary, I'm very rational. Do you have any idea how radio waves penetrate through the ground?"

She shook her head negatively.

"Then I'll tell you briefly. I search for minerals and water with the help of radio waves which penetrate through the ground. Without drilling derricks and soil tests. There's nothing irrational about it whatsoever. Sounds interesting?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Tell me about it. Your conference doesn't start until twelve anyway."

I told her about our expedition that past summer to the Vasyugansk Swamps in the north of the Tomsk Region, how we were eaten alive by mosquitoes, how our equipment broke down and everyone grew grouchy and withdrawn, and how our leader, Goshka, began to bellow out songs. At first we politely asked him to be quiet or move on somewhere else, and then we began shaking our fists, but he kept up his ear-splitting caterwauling, spitting up the gnats that kept getting into his throat, and called us "cream of wheat". The "cream of wheat" didn't get to us, but his singing did. Finally someone broke down and burst into convulsive peals of laugh-

ter. And then the rest joined in and howled until their sides were splitting.

"Do you want an encore?" Goshka asked, and added, "There you have it, 'cream of wheat'."

The mosquitoes kept biting, and the equipment didn't work, but our anger turned in upon ourselves, upon our helplessness. And we no longer wanted to be "cream of wheat" and refused to leave the taiga, even though they called us back three times. Only we never did succeed in getting our equipment working properly. No one was actually very surprised at that. There is electric, magnetic, radiation, and gravitation prospecting. But we wanted something entirely different. We wanted to see through the earth, like through a transparent glass. And so the expedition fell through."

"And yet it was still interesting," I concluded. "And necessary..."

I thought I detected a momentary flicker of envy in her eyes. When you came down to it, I at least was doing something, striving for something, picking myself back up after a fall and plugging on ahead. But how many years now had she been sitting in this tiny stand, selling newspapers and postcards, counting out change, seeing nothing but outstretched hands through the window and not even attempting to change her life. I straightened up my shoulders and proposed:

"Katya-Katyusha, why don't you join our next expedition?"

"As a cook?" she asked in total earnestness.

"Why a cook?" I said, feeling embarrassed.

"Then as what?"

"Well, for example..."

"All right, I accept the offer," she said.

"Really?"

"Yes. I know you won't take me anyway ... you're just joking. And besides, selling newspapers is also interesting."

"Without a doubt," I said in what I felt was a tone of sarcasm. "You'll wind up sitting here your whole life."

She didn't take offense, and just flashed her big eyes at me. Now, instead of envy, I detected only laughter and irony in them.

"Hm," I muttered.

I was already toasty warm, but I didn't feel like leaving. All this time not a single person had tapped on the window. No one probably felt like going out and buying a paper in this cold.

I stole a glance at Katya. She was less than medium height, with black curls spilling out from beneath her knit hat. And her eyes were black, and her cheeks rounded, as if she had puffed them out slightly. She was wearing high-heeled leather boots, but in the corner behind the chair I had noticed a pair of felt ones. Her lightweight winter coat was half unbuttoned, and a fluffy blue scarf was visible beneath it.

"And now you're off to battle once again?" Katya asked, laughing. "Do you want to prove that you were right?"

"That's right," I answered.

"You won't succeed. And they'll call you an irrational dreamer once again."

"Ah, Katya-Katyusha," I said peevishly. "Why are you saying that? There's no way you can know that for sure. No one knows as yet who..."

She interrupted me by thrusting a newspaper into my hand and saying:

"Read."

I skimmed over the front page and found nothing exceptionally noteworthy. Everything was as it should be: lumberjack heroes, milkmaids, initiatives, competitions.

"The third page," Katya prompted.

I opened the paper to the third page and read: "An all-Union conference on the propagation of radio waves is currently underway in Ust-Mansk."

Katya giggled softly into her sleeve, probably at the look of startled astonishment on my face. "At noon on December 24 the first session of the all-Union conference on the propagation of radio waves was opened..."

"What's today's date?" I asked hoarsely, wondering with horror how I could have lost an entire day.

"The twenty-fourth," Katya replied.

"Then why are they referring to the conference in the past tense? It won't even open for another hour yet!"

"Because it's tomorrow's paper."

I turned the paper over. *The Red Banner,* December 25 edition.

"I don't understand... What is today's date?"

"The twenty-fourth. What else!"

"I'll tell you what, Katya. You'll have to excuse me because my head doesn't seem to be working right. It must be the cold."

"There's nothing at all wrong with your head. It's tomorrow's paper! I always sell tomorrow's papers. Only there's not a very big demand for them. Everyone wants today's papers. And they don't deliver today's papers to me."

"That can't be!"

But the article was about our conference. And my report was denounced as a hare-brained scheme.

"Strange," I said. "Now I know what's going to happen to me in the next few hours. But what if I wanted things to turn out differently than the way they're described here? What if I just didn't go to the conference?"

"It won't work," Katya said. "You don't have any excuse for doing that. After all, you're not the only one presenting a report."

"Yes, that's true." For a second I pictured Goshka's furious countenance and shuddered. "It doesn't look as though anything can be changed. Except for some minor details which aren't included in the paper anyway. You've really got something here, Katya. Selling tomorrow's papers is quite different than selling today's. Very interesting."

"Does that mean you won't take me on your expedition?" she asked mockingly.

"Here's what we'll do, Katya," I said,

without answering her question. "What time do you close the stand?"

"Eight o'clock."

"I'll come by for you at seven-thirty. Okay?"

"Okay. Only what are we going to do? You can't stay out on the street for long. You'll freeze to death."

"We'll think of something. I've got to run, Katya-Katyusha. I want to do all that I can to deserve being called an irrational dreamer. I want to!"

"See you," she said with a nod. "And I want to wait for you."

I stood frozen in the doorway, not knowing what to say. She was laughing at me again!

"Hurry, you're letting out all the warmth. I'll be waiting!"

2

I ran out into the minus fifty degree cold and, enveloped in a cloud of steam, raced up the avenue past the university dormitory, past the statue of Kirov with an upraised hand, past the buildings of the polytechnical institute.

Inside the spacious but somewhat crude foyer of the Palace of Culture, with its candelabras, chandeliers, and leather couches, a crowd of people had already gathered. I checked my purely symbolic coat in the cloakroom, ran up to the second floor, and

peered over the balcony in search of a familiar face in the crowd.

Luck was with me, and in ten minute's time I was already conversing with one of my former institute classmates. The questions flew back and forth: Where? Why? Whom? Married? Children? How many? Dissertation? Semyon Fyodorov? Of course I remember!

I didn't meet anyone else I knew, and my classmate soon excused himself and left. He was one of the organizers of the conference, and I understood. It was a busy job managing these conferences.

At twelve o'clock on the dot the chairman called the meeting to order. A famous academician got up and gave an introductory speech. Then the work agenda for the sections and subsections, committees and commissions was announced and the conference got underway.

For some reason I hadn't taken a paper from Katya's newsstand—probably because I'd been flustered and in a hurry. And now I had no choice but to listen to long, boring surveys.

During the break everyone rushed to the buffet to drink beer and gulp down sandwiches.

After that the sections began their work, and I discovered to my surprise that there were some forty people in our section. I had been under the impression that all the radio physicists had plunged headlong into research of such things as the ionosphere and plasma, which were closer to astronautics.

Half of the reports were presented by higher degree candidates who needed six printed works to their credit. Even the flimsiest of reports was counted as a printed work. And therefore the candidates tried to turn them out as quickly as possible in order to heave a sigh of relief and quietly return to their seats. Ordinarily such reports were not followed by speeches or questions.

Then the more serious reports began. Some were simply brilliant. It was already going on six o'clock when I gave my presentation. I was collected and self-confident, and the audience listened raptly. I even began to think that there would be no article tomorrow about the "irrational dreamer". The questions asked were the most elementary, and I was already hoping to leave in one piece, but it turned out that this was only preliminary reconnaissance work. And one half hour later they had torn my report to shreds. The "diehards" from the Ust-Mansk Polytechnical Institute made an especially determined effort. Then, just as ill luck would have it, a news reporter suddenly walked in and snapped a few shots.

For some reason I was not especially upset. I would catch hell from Goshka, of course, and the money for the summer expedition would be three times less the amount necessary. But I had done everything that I could. I had tried to change the report in tomorrow's paper. I had tried my utmost, but it hadn't worked. And now I knew that everything in the paper would be just as I had read. And so

the girl in the glass newsstand actually did sell tomorrow's newspapers!

3

It was already seven forty by the time I reached the stand. I had twenty minutes before closing time to warm up a little.

"Well, how did it go?" Katya asked, a sly twinkle in her eyes.

"Everything went as the article said," I replied. "A harebrained theory. Only this is all so strange. Where are your tomorrow's papers delivered from?"

"From the printing house," she said.

"And no one in Ust-Mansk thinks it's a bit uncommon that you sell tomorrow's papers?"

I thought I saw a twinge of sadness in her eyes.

"You see, hardly anyone knows that these are tomorrow's papers. They all think they're today's."

"Hold on now. You mean that for you this paper is tomorrow's, and for everyone else it's an ordinary, today's paper?"

"And for you it's tomorrow's," Katya said.

"And for me. All right then. And for everyone else?"

"And for everyone else it's today's."

"Do you often meet people for whom it's tomorrow's?"

"Not very."

"But seriously."

"You're the first." She smiled and wrinkled her nose. "I knew right away that you'd see it."

It was time to close the stand. Katya changed into her felt boots, turned off the light and locked up the stand. Luckily we waited no more than a minute before catching a taxi. Walking around outside in such weather was out of the question, especially for me. I invited her to the apartment of my friend from the institute, and she accepted.

My friend lived in a one-bedroom apartment. His wife had just come home from work and immediately began bustling around making dinner. Their three children, ranging in age from six to nine, started up a conversation with us about Tom Sawyer.

Our host brought out a bottle of wine to celebrate the occasion. And we drank it up, of course. It was around eleven o'clock when we left. I walked Katya to her dormitory and we sat in the lobby and talked for another hour or so. This time I didn't invite her along on our expedition—I myself would have gladly agreed to sell tomorrow's newspapers.

There was still an unanswered question that was bothering me, and so I asked:

"But what's the sense in these tomorrow's papers if no one even knows about them?"

"But I know," she answered.

"But you can't do anything to change things!"

"Who knows?" she replied mysteriously. "Not all tomorrow's papers are identical, you see. There are differences—mostly minor ones,

of course. The weather is a bit warmer or colder. Someone's illness or recovery, someone's joy or sorrow. From these slightly differing papers I select the one, definitive version."

She bent my head down sharply, kissed me, and ran off after shouting:

"Tomorrow at nine!"

I just stood there, dumbfounded and happy.

4

The next morning I woke up around seven. My roommate was still sound asleep, and by now his inspired snoring was doubtlessly reverberating throughout the entire cosmos. He had kept me from sleeping all night, but even in my present wide-awake state I could not tolerate listening to his roulades. I got dressed and went to the buffet to have a sausage and cup of coffee. Then I went back to the room, grabbed my briefcase and coat and went down to the lobby. I sat there for about an hour. I was supposed to meet Katya at the stand at nine, and it was still only eight.

By eight-thirty I had exhausted my patience and went charging out into the morning cold. The temperature had not risen one degree from yesterday and, having learned from bitter experience, I now moved through the streets exclusively at a jog.

The newsstand glowed as it had yesterday, as if sprinkled with diamonds. I knocked on the window and instead of a good morning greeting, shouted:

"Katya-Katyusha, I'm freezing!"

She didn't answer, and I heard the sound of a paper being crumpled inside the stand. I pulled on the door knob and tumbled inside the stand.

Katya had turned around to face me and was clutching a stack of papers reeking of printer's ink to her chest.

"Am I on time? I'm not late?"

"I don't know, maybe," she said in a barely audible voice.

I was slightly surprised and puzzled. She was upset about something and it seemed as though she didn't want to talk to me. I asked:

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes," she said. "I've got to leave."

I didn't understand a thing.

"I'm sorry, Dmitry. At ten o'clock a fire broke out ... will break out in the orphanage on Vershinin Street. I've got to go and warn them."

I glanced at my watch. There was still over an hour left, and I knew that Vershinin Street was only a ten minute walk away.

"Is there a telephone anywhere nearby? All we have to do is call them."

"There's a telephone in the Radioelectronic Institute, but they might not believe me over the phone. I've got to go there."

"We still have time," I said. "When did you read about it?"

"Just now, when you knocked on the window."

"Let's go," I said.

"You stay here. I've got to go alone."

"That's nonsense. Do you know the details?"

"Yes," she answered, but somehow her answer was forced, as if she wasn't telling the truth.

"Did all the children get out safely?"

"Yes ... only one almost got burned."

I ran outside and Katya followed, locked up the stand, and thrust the key into my pocket. I was a bit worked up and didn't feel the cold as acutely as I had five minutes earlier.

She grabbed my hand and we began to run. The first hundred meters or so we remained silent, and then she turned her head and looked searchingly into my eyes. I tried to smile, but my lips had already managed to freeze.

"I would go with you even as a cook," she said.

"Then let's go! Make up your mind!" I felt full of conviction, but somehow my words came out sounding less than heroic.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful," she replied.

"Then it's settled." I stopped her for a second. "There's no sense waiting until summer. Let's go now, in three days' time, when the conference is over."

She crinkled up her nose in a funny way, nodded her head, and tugged me along again with her. We ran along Kirov Street. Beside the October movie theatre we cut a corner and wound up on Vershinin Street, directly opposite the orphanage. It was a new, two-storey brick building, there was light in the windows, and nothing gave any indication of

an imminent fire. The thought even occurred to me that Katya was playing a trick on me, that she was testing me for some reason. But she pulled on the gate of the small fence so decisively that all my doubts instantly vanished. The gate immediately creaked open, but things did not go so smoothly at the main entrance. Either the bell wasn't working or no one heard it. And it was only when we decided to run around the building that we realized that the main entrance was probably blocked up with all kinds of junk and that we had to use the back entrance.

The door was open, but there was no light—it had been switched off, of course, to save energy. Tripping over the steps and one another, we made our way to the hallway. There it was light. Opposite we could make out the main door, barely visible through piles of the most varied objects. The kitchen was situated to our left. Beside it was a room which seemed to be the dining room, and there a group of youngsters was already sitting, mop-haired and with clean-shaven heads, with braids and short hairdos. Two nursemaids with trays in their hands were walking around the tables. To the right was a large bedroom. I did not know, of course, what was on the second floor.

Katya immediately walked over to the door of the dining room and beckoned to the women:

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

The nursemaids stared at her in surprise, and one of them placed her tray down on a

stool and walked over to the door.

"Hello," Katya said and beckoned for her to step out into the hallway.

"Hello," the woman said and stepped across the threshold.

"Don't ask how I know this," Katya began, "I can't explain it intelligibly... Around ten o'clock a fire will break out in this building."

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed, clutching at her chest.

"You must get the children dressed and make arrangements for the residents of the neighboring buildings to take them in."

"Oh!" the woman repeated and called to her co-worker: "Maria Pavlovna!"

The children watched this scene with interest and were beginning to grow loud and boisterous.

"Maria Pavlovna, there's a fire here," the woman wailed.

"What happened?" Maria Pavlovna asked in a stern voice. "Who are you?"

"I sell newspapers and he's an engineer. At ten o'clock a fire's going to break out here. You've got to evacuate the children."

"Evacuate them in this cold?" Maria Pavlovna said in the same stern voice.

"But a fire, Maria Pavlovna!" the first woman whispered.

"You've got to take some action," I said, finally stepping into the conversation. "Do you have a telephone?"

"Yes," Maria Pavlovna pointed to a small

table with a telephone which happened to be right behind me.

"He'll call the fire station, and meanwhile you can get the children dressed," Katya said softly and calmly. She tried to make her voice sound convincing, so that they would believe her.

The first woman, all in a flutter, went running up to the second floor. The cook walked out of the kitchen and joined us. The janitor, all muffled up in a scarf which almost covered his eyes, walked in from outside and thumped his wooden shovel, entirely useless outside in such weather, on the floor.

I dialed the number and when I heard a voice answer on the other end of the line, I said:

"We need a fire truck at the orphanage on Vershinin Street."

"How long ago did the fire start?" the voice promptly inquired, and then others shouted to my invisible conversation partner: "Start up number seven! What's burning?"

"Nothing right now, but it will break out at ten o'clock."

"Jokers again," the voice said sourly and hung up the receiver.

I dialed the number a second time, but my conversation ended just as ineffectually. They didn't believe me.

Three women came down from the second floor. One of them was the director of the orphanage.

"We have complied with all the fire safety

provisions," she said. "Are you here on an inspection?"

Once again Katya had to explain, but the director dragged us over to the wall and insisted that we read the "Procedure for the evacuation of children in the event of a fire". The "Procedure" was simply marvelous, and it was a shame that it was impossible to carry out in this building, under any circumstances whatsoever.

"Do you at least have fire-extinguishers?" I asked, glancing at my watch. It was already close to ten.

"Yes," the director said. "We did, that is. They used to be right here," and she pointed to three dark blotches on the wall. "One fell loose and almost killed Tanya Solntseva. We had to move them out to the shed."

Time was passing. Something had to be done quickly.

"Why aren't the fire-extinguishers in place?" I bellowed.

The director was immediately abashed. Who knew, maybe we really were part of a commission here to make an inspection.

"Anikeyich!" she shouted. "Bring the fire-extinguishers in here, on the double!"

The janitor rushed outside and returned a second later to report that he didn't have the keys to the shed. The women began to bustle around frantically, trying to determine who might have the keys. Anikeyich finally found them in one of his pockets and rushed outside once again.

"Get the children dressed!" Katya commanded.

The children were herded out of the dining room and along the corridor, but all this was done half-heartedly, as if everyone was waiting for the false alarm to be called off any moment.

The children numbered fifty or so. And, as I learned later, there were a hundred and twenty more on the second floor. I began to clear away the junk pile blocking the main entrance. The sleds I tossed into the bedroom, and I rolled the half-empty barrels with the remnants of sour cabbage into the kitchen. Someone made an effort to help me, but I shouted for them to get the children dressed and out of the building as quickly as possible.

Katya called the fire station once more, and it seemed that they finally believed her. I shoveled away half of the pile, and now had only to make my way to the door in order to fling the rest right out onto the street. All that remained were odd assorted rakes, shovels, old door-mats, and buckets with holes in their bottoms.

The cook doused the stove with water. We began unplugging the electric heaters, but the wall sockets were in the most inaccessible spots, and it took some while to reach some of them. One of the nursemaids ran across the street to the movie theatre to make arrangements for the children to be evacuated to the lobby. The director still did not believe us. God knows what she would have done with us

had these preparations, disorganized as they were, proven needless!

The door to the back entrance opened, and the janitor came crashing in with two fire-extinguishers in his arms. He sneezed several times, trying to get out some words.

"We're on fire!" he finally managed to shout, adding a few strong words. He banged one of the fire-extinguishers against the floor, but in its frozen condition it was of no use whatsoever. Meanwhile, the steam which had burst into the hall together with the janitor was not dispersing. As we soon discovered, it was not steam at all—it was smoke. My eyes began to sting. The janitor rushed to help me. And by the time the main entrance was finally clear, the wooden partition was already burning.

By the time the fire truck arrived, the children had all been evacuated to the movie theatre. The chief fireman remained behind to investigate the cause of the fire. The nursemaids were still in a state of shock. And I sped along in the ambulance, holding Katya's cold and clammy hand. Katya had tried to hold back the teetering wooden partition between the two rooms so that the last group of children could be evacuated. They were led out the emergency exit and down the metal fire escape leading from the second floor to the courtyard. They were all safely evacuated, but she did not manage to jump out of the way in time and the burning partition pinned her to the floor. Just one minute prior to that she had thrust a half-dressed little girl into my

arms and shouted that I go outside to the window in case the others would have to be passed out through it.

I came out without a single burn, but they wouldn't even allow me to look at her face—it was covered with white bandages.

5

I sat in the hallway of the clinic, shaken and numb. They said that they would do everything in their power. I could imagine in what situations they said such a thing.

They suggested that I leave three different times because I could do nothing to help and only pestered the doctors with my questions. When they asked me to leave for the fourth time, and I continued to cite excuses for staying, one of the young doctors suddenly said:

"Let him try if he really wants to help. They'll make an announcement over the radio this evening, and tomorrow it'll be in the papers, but by then it might be too late. Where do you live?"

I shook my head:

"I'm just visiting."

"Too bad. Do you have any friends here?"

"Yes, but very few."

"We have to do a skin transplant. We need about fifty donors, maybe even more.

"You'll have them!" I shouted and ran outside.

The conference was already underway.

I had enough presence of mind not to create a panic and to find my old pal from the institute. He heard me out silently and then said:

"Who would have guessed. Yesterday she was so bright and cheerful." Then he added: "It's good that you came to me first. Everything will be taken care of. We'll start with your section."

I followed him into the room where the radio physicists-edaphologists were working and sank down onto the first chair I came to. My friend whispered something to the chairman of the section, and when the presentation in progress had ended, the chairman announced to everyone present:

"Comrades! There's been a terrible accident here in town. Donors for skin transplants are needed. I think we'll call a break and all go together to the clinic. It's not far, only two blocks away... A girl's life is at stake."

Group by group and at regular intervals, the entire conference showed up at the clinic.

At around one o'clock that afternoon I was finally allowed to see Katya. She was shrouded in white, from the white pillow and sheet to the white swathe of bandages covering her face. Only the black circles of her eyes with their singed lashes and her faintly outlined lips were visible. I sat down on the stool beside her bed. Katya stared at me motionlessly, without blinking, and I didn't know what to say to her now. The words stuck in my throat. I would have stroked her cheek and her hair, but that was impossible. I nodded to

her and tried to muster up a cheerful smile. I don't know what she saw in my smile, but her lips moved slightly and I read the words:

"My cheeks will turn black, you won't love me..."

"Yes I will, I will," I said. "Katya, I'm going to take you away from Ust-Mansk. And this summer we'll go to the Vasyugansk Swamps to feed the mosquitoes."

I was asked to leave the ward. Katya's condition had taken another turn for the worse.

"There's nothing you can do to help," they told me. "Go back to your hotel. Stop by Katya's work and tell them what happened. And in general—do something, act! You can come back tomorrow morning."

I walked outside and headed down the avenue.

6

I walked along in a state of mental torpor, oblivious to everything, including the cold. When I reached Katya's newsstand I remembered that the key was in my pocket. I opened the lock, stepped inside, and turned on the light. A newspaper lay opened to the fourth page. I immediately found the brief account in the local news section. It stated that yesterday at ten o'clock a fire broke out in the orphanage on Vershinin Street, its cause attributed to faulty electric wiring. The sole victim was Yekaterina Smirnova, who perished during the rescue operations.

Katya Smirnova. I hadn't even known her last name. She had just been Katya-Katyusha.

But the article was incorrect! She hadn't perished during the rescue operations. She was still alive!

My glance strayed upon a crumpled newspaper lying nearby and I remembered suddenly that when I had come by that morning Katya had crumpled up the paper, glanced at the one lying open before me, and only then had said that there would be a fire. She had known what would happen, and had gone anyway.

I unfolded the crumpled paper. It was also tomorrow's. And there was a mention of the fire. Only it stated that Dmitry Yegorov had perished.

A muffled pounding resounded in my ears. Now I understood with my entire being what she meant when she said that she selected tomorrow's paper every morning. She always had several different versions. And so today she had chosen her death only because the only other choice was me. I was the one who was supposed to hold up the burning wooden partition, but she sent me outside after entrusting me with a task that anyone could have carried out. I was the one who should have been pinned beneath the burning boards.

I took another paper from the pile... Dmitry Yegorov perished... A third paper... The same thing. I searched stubbornly for the paper I needed. There had to be a third version. There had to be! Katya just hadn't had time enough to find it. She had been in such a hur-

ry. When she found the second version she had been so happy that I would remain alive...

Today I will select tomorrow's paper.

I found the version I needed. It was accurate. After all, hundreds of people did everything possible to save her life, hundreds of people, without even being aware of it, had tried to change the contents of the article.

And I decided that I would select this version and sell it, so that everyone would know that Katya was alive, that she had been seriously burned, but that she would definitely pull through. I would convince everyone who walked up to the newsstand of this.

But it was so cold that no one wanted to pause for a second by the newsstand. And then I stepped out onto the sidewalk with a bundle of papers and began handing them out to the passers-by.

"Please read about Katya Smirnova! She's going to live! Read about it! Katya's going to live! You've got to root for her!"

At first I was sure that everyone would think I had lost my mind. But nothing of the sort happened. People took the papers, stopped and asked me questions, expressed their sympathy and confidence that she would pull through.

"You must want very badly for it to happen," I said. "It's Katya who brings joys of all magnitudes into your lives. You don't realize it, because you don't know that if it weren't for her, there would be no joyful

occasions in your lives. It's she who wants the weather to be beautiful, and then you go walking in the woods. And you have a wonderful time. It's she who averts the accidents on the streets. She's the one who saw to it that ninety young women found themselves boyfriends. If it weren't for her they might never have met. True, she can't fulfill the plan of even the tiniest factory or mill. But that doesn't matter. There are plenty of others who can do that. Read the paper. Let Katya live!"

"She's the queen of Ust-Mansk," someone said.

They believed me, and now I knew for certain that Katya would live. Because everyone wanted her to.

I stopped by the General Post Office and turned in the keys to the newsstand. Then I rushed over to the conference, and the "diehards" from the Ust-Mansk Polytechnic Institute told me that I would be working temporarily in their laboratories, that there was something to my high-flown theories after all, and that they had already sent a telegram to my institute requesting that my stay be extended. They understood that I simply could not leave this town right now.

I would stay here, in Ust-Mansk, until I proved that it's possible to see through the earth, until Katya got well, until preparations for the expedition got underway, and until we both flew together to the North, to the swamps, the mosquitoes, the rainy days, and the songs.

I ran to the clinic. The fog was so thick that nothing was visible twenty steps away. Fifty below zero! The rare crunch of footsteps and the piercing honks of the cars, and the cold, the cold... Both in Ust-Mansk, and its suburbs, and for a thousand kilometers all around...

I ran to Katya, because she was waiting for me.

VASILY POLISHCHUK

THEOREM 54

Mikhail Petrovich Ryazantsev had long ceased to concern himself with his appearance, and therefore had not the faintest idea of how his external shell was changing. And then one day, at the insistence of his wife, he went to a clothing store to buy a suit—and found himself in a fitting booth with mirrors on all three sides. Examining himself in the mirrors beneath the scrutiny of Olga Sergeyevna, he saw three entirely different but equally unpleasant-looking men. The first was narrow-shouldered, with a fattened, ape-like occiput, the second had a drooping nose and shiny pate, and the third had very familiar circles under his eyes, two day's growth of stubble on his chin, and a cheek that was beginning to sag. His observation made him feel weary and browbeaten, as usual.

He grew alarmed—but not from the signs of aging reflected in the silent glass. He had realized suddenly that his neglected outer shell had grown into a separate being, and moreover, a being of a deeply alien kind. Such an individual should smoke cheap Belomor cigarettes, stand submissively in line for a full hour for a mug of turbid beer, and consider gaping blankly at the television the greatest of all earthly pleasures. In the generally accepted, external language there were vague terms to describe this individual, such as plebeian, or degenerate. But in Ryazantsev's own, internal language there was a special title for this being, a thousand times more precise. Due however to a certain coincidence, this word sounded slightly indecent to the untrained ear.

Mikhail Petrovich had been speaking in this internal language since his early childhood, and without it he might have foundered in this world, since he totally lacked the ability to give and carry out orders.

Every minute of the day, without even noticing it themselves, the inhabitants of our planet engage in a give-and-take of orders, while Ryazantsev, it seemed, had been born with some sort of defect. The moment he heard any authoritative voice he grew rigid and lost all muscular coordination. When this happened to him as a young boy, Ryazantsev had been known to babble out a few piping words, but they hadn't helped. Therefore, when he became a bit older, he learned to keep his words to himself and to buy his way

free from the dictates of others' wills.

He was willing to pay any price—agonizingly earned excellent grades, awkward flattery, and even the sandwiches his mother packed for his lunch at school. He got himself enrolled in the institute in order to buy his way out of serving in the army, thus avoiding a multitude of strangers who would have had the right to give him orders. He even got married in order to escape the tears of Olga, his classmate—a frail, unsmiling girl who walked with a limp. And after that he hardly looked in the mirror at all except to shave, having given his outward appearance total freedom for independent mimicry. Thus, unnoticed to himself, Ryazantsev had turned into a man of indeterminate age whose thoughts—if he thought at all—were even more difficult to guess—a middle-aged, typical family man, whose fate was to wear suits of indeterminate fit which were always available in the stores. This was the revelation that struck him in the men's clothing store.

On his way home with his latest baggy suit, Mikhail Petrovich reflected despondently upon the sorry state of his figure, the inadequacy of the external language, and the fact that he would evidently have to change his job once again.

Because of the character he had been endowed with at birth, Ryazantsev changed jobs frequently, so that over the course of his career he had had occasion to design bridges, and calculate irrigation systems, and create transportation networks. As a programmer he

was tops in his field, and he had a reputation as an irreplaceable worker. At every place of work his resignment was always met with regret, and none of his employers ever quite understood exactly why this gloomy person was leaving. But the fact was that Mikhail Petrovich submitted his resignation papers just as soon as his bosses, having grown accustomed to a new face in the office, began using the familiar form of address.

Now, after his experience in the fitting room, he decided that he was undeserving of any different treatment, but nonetheless he felt it was time he finished with the designing of chemical combines. Ordinarily he found this quite easy to do. Mikhail Petrovich did not take his transient jobs seriously, and never really considered them his true "work".

His work was a different, secret matter, which he devoted himself to almost continually and about which only one other soul knew. This was his friend, Vasily Stepanovich, a mathematician whose passion was linguistics, extraterrestrial civilizations, yoga, and spiritualism, and for which reason, despite his forty years of age, he had never advanced higher than the position of junior scientific worker.

Vasily Stepanovich was not allowed to keep his manuscripts at home, and was able to work on his dictionary of the Akhtu language only clandestinely, at his friends' apartments. When his wife was around he knew no languages, cracked stupid jokes, and spoke exclusively about his upcoming

promotion. For this reason many considered him a common boor. But Vasily Stepanovich devoted all his spare time to his dictionary, which he compiled according to some special system which he liked to refer to grandly as integral. Just what sort of system this was and how he knew the Akhtu language was a mystery: Vasily Stepanovich had never once set eyes on a real live Akhtunian.

Ryazantsev's wife rejoiced whenever Vasily Stepanovich came to visit. "A home is blessed when there's a guest," she always said whenever anyone would listen. And she was not being facetious. Whenever someone came to visit—even Vasily Stepanovich—her husband would come to life and acquire the ability to speak. And she wished for nothing more than that. Olga Sergeyevna tried the best she could to make the guest comfortable: she would bring out beer and some modest snack and then go limping back to the kitchen.

If only she knew how her husband despised beer...

And now, as the Ryazantsevs drew near their building, Olga Sergeyevna's spirits rose when she spotted Vasily Stepanovich's plump figure perched meekly on the bench outside. She proceeded to bustle around and in less than five minutes' time both men had been seated at the table.

No sooner had she left the room than Vasily Stepanovich quickly spread out his manuscripts and Ryazantsev shut his eyes.

The internal language did not lend itself to written notes on paper and therefore demand-

ed especial concentration. Otherwise the terms lost their co-ordination, and Ryazantsev would lose his bearings and regress into primitive external logic. In order to shut it out, he would solve by his system some problem considered extremely complex in the external world. He would prove the great theorem of Fermat or analyze one of Hilbert's obscure problems. This method of limbering up was unknown even to Vasily Stepanovich, who had no inkling of the fact that his friend knew anything about higher mathematics.

But this evening Ryazantsev had difficulty entering into the necessary state of concentration. He was distracted by the sounds of the children playing outside and the pungent smell of the herring set ceremoniously on the table by Olga Sergeyevna. And when things finally began to fall into place, the guest suddenly fidgeted in his chair and broke the vow of silence:

"They've got our whole department working on three points, Mikhail Petrovich," he said meekly.

"What points?" Ryazantsev pronounced, switching reluctantly over to the external language.

"This is all pretty hush-hush. But, well, in broad terms... In general, this is the problem: under what conditions does one point collide in succession with two other points when all three are moving at random. We've been racking our brains for half a year now. And now they've put our whole department to work on it."

"That's absurd," Ryazantsev muttered, still trying to maintain his hard-won concentration.

"To you it's absurd, but people's bonuses are at stake. And the person who solves it stands to be promoted to senior staff."

On that note their conversation ended. Ryazantsev shut his eyes once again. But Hilbert's problem had already slipped away, and those three meaningless points now loomed importunately in his head.

Vasily Stepanovich was munching on a sandwich and pondering over the eighteenth meaning of the word "tai", when he heard a voice which sounded strangely unfamiliar.

"The point that stands a chance of colliding successively with two others is that which lies on the surface, the curvature of which is determined by the first ... no, the second derivative of such a function."

Vasily Stepanovich was struck dumb. In all the years he had known Ryazantsev, not once had he ever pronounced so many words in succession. Raising his eyes, he saw a sight that was utterly inconceivable. It was Ryazantsev, there was no doubt about it, but what had happened to him? A trim, even sporty-looking fellow padded noiselessly around the room, a slip of paper covered with formulas in his hand. And there was not a trace of sagging cheeks, and his eyes were shining. What had happened to his usual browbeaten appearance?

"Well, why don't you say something!" he said sternly to Vasily Stepanovich.

"I don't want to interrupt you now, old pal, not now!" his guest babbled, gazing at him lovingly.

"Given such a condition," Ryazantsev continued, "the solution can be found through numerical methods. Only this will require an unknown number of calculations. Well, go ahead, say something!"

"I can't! You've hit on a *kiai*, an invincible *kiai*!"

"What dialect is that? Akhtuanian? Let's get back to our points. There's another method that can be used to solve the problem. If the points are moving at a speed less than that of light, then if the following condition is observed..."

Hearing the sound of a dish crashing onto the floor, Olga Sergeyevna walked into the room to witness an unbelievable scene. Podgy Vasily Stepanovich was standing on his toptoes and kissing her husband's unshaven cheek, babbling, "General solution! It's a general solution! And that means I was right about fifty-three." When they spied her both grew suddenly subdued. Her husband stared off into space with his mouth half open, and Vasily Stepanovich began to talk about an upcoming raise in salary in an affected voice.

And now we ought to explain about just what "fifty-three" Vasily Stepanovich considered himself correct. You will have to shut your eyes a bit to the slipshodness of this expression, which is frequently employed in

scientific works when some theorem must be designated which is familiar to the reader or he must be referred to a corresponding note in a list of references.

Vasily Stepanovich was referring to a small brochure which he had found in the city library with the mysterious title *Fifty-six Theorems of Evolution, Following From the Seventh Postulate of Kharchenko.* The author of the brochure was a certain unknown university lecturer named Shvindler. Despite an exhaustive effort, Vasily Stepanovich had been unable to locate it in any other archive or library. What was more, an attempt to check it out a second time from the city library proved unavailing: the poorly printed brochure had been mislaid somewhere. As a consequence, many of its strange attributes, including the most suspicious of imprints: "Vasyuki, April 1, 1996", were lost to oblivion. However, Vasily Stepanovich had managed to commit the theorems themselves to memory. Despite his much flaunted scientific scepticism, he easily became an adept of any mystical teaching. And these theorems were mystical and unsubstantiated, which was especially valuable to people of such a stamp.

Kharchenko's seventh postulate read as follows: there exists a limit to the cognitive powers of the brain, just as there is a limit to the resolving power of any physical instrument. From this, universtiy lecturer Shvindler drew a series of extravagant deductions, including theorem 53, which concerned the rea-

sons for the surplus capacity of the human brain which, as is commonly known, realizes more often than not only a miniscule portion of its potential.

The last stages of man's evolution—asserted the mysterious Shvindler—were advances in the evolution of language. The birth of abstract concepts and later mathematical logic liberated a multitude of brain cells which had previously been saturated with particulars, thereby creating a surplus which allowed this incomprehensible instrument to work further on the augmentation of its resolving power.

For two years now Vasily Stepanovich had tormented Ryazantsev with this theorem 53, gazing at him worshipfully and repeating over and over that Ryazantsev's internal language was in fact the next advance in the evolution of thought and that the logic of this language, based on his observations, was several orders of magnitude more perfect than mathematical logic.

But then what else could you expect from Vasily Stepanovich? He was an adept! But still, sometimes Ryazantsev was inclined to believe him.

A home should be the abode of several generations. Otherwise, where would its peace and atmosphere come from? And isn't the age in which we live considered anxiety-ridden because almost no one lives in the place where he was born and raised?

In Ryazantsev's dreams all the events, even the most absurd, took place in the same setting—his mother's cramped room in a musty

communal apartment towards which he consciously harboured an intense dislike. Nor did he like his shiny new apartment which his wife had managed to receive through her work—Ryazantsev gloomily called this modular-panelled fortress a "machine for habitation". Nonetheless, among the other residents Ryazantsev was known as a model husband who displayed exemplary zeal in the area of amenities. He had a habit of busying himself with repairs and improvements around the apartment as a way of absolving himself of the necessity of talking with Olga Sergeyevna.

The following morning found Mikhail Petrovich on the balcony, where he was putting up yet another superfluous shelf. His wife sensed that he was in a black mood and left him to himself. Meanwhile, Ryazantsev was thinking over his blunder of the day before. Even though he knew Vasily Stepanovich quite well, he should never have revealed what he had. Such things never slipped by without consequences.

And the consequences were swift to follow. The telephone rang—a rare occurrence in the Ryazantsevs' apartment.

"Good-day, Mikhail Petrovich. This is professor Konstantin Ivanovich Kalmykov, doctor of technical sciences," the modulated voice of a lecturer addressed him ceremoniously.

Ryazantsev winced painfully and immediately saw a vision of a grey-haired man in a suede jacket. A lean, sun-tanned habitué of

international conferences, conspicuous by his patent cultured erudition. Each year like clockwork in March the professor took a trip to the mountains, drank dry wine with skilfully concealed repugnance, and preferred to drink cheap port wine in the circle of his subordinates. Before Kalmykov, after receiving no response, had plunged on ahead, Ryazantsev also managed to come to the realization that he was thinking in the external language. Kalmykov went on:

"Vasily Stepanovich has reported to me that you have made some sort of breakthrough. Well, I gave him quite a dressing down, as you can understand. However, that's something we can work out—victors are not judged. And it appears that we'll have to make you a co-author, and possibly transfer you over to our organization. So make an effort to stop by and bring three copies..."

Ryazantsev did not listen any further, because the expression "make an effort" was one with which he had long been familiar. The person who said "make an effort" would be using more familiar forms of address before long. And Ryazantsev immediately felt browbeaten, and not only the problem concerning the three points, but even the professor's simple logic became instantly incomprehensible. In the end, however, the professor still managed to make himself heard:

"I'll be expecting you tomorrow at ten. There'll be a pass for you downstairs."

"I won't be coming," Mikhail Petrovich

uttered with difficulty. "I've forgotten everything."

And with that he hung up the receiver.

"What have you done, Neanderthal?"

"Exactly what do you mean?" the sun-tanned man in suede asked, his eyes wide with surprise. Never had Vasily Stepanovich, a lowly junior staff employee, spoken to him with such undue familiarity.

"I mean fifty-three! Have you heard of Shvindler's fifty-third theorem?"

"I can't say I have."

"Right, and it would be beyond you anyway! Neanderthal, I'm telling you. You've got no room in your brain for anything but those three accursed points. You still haven't progressed to the level of abstract reasoning."

"Come off it, now!"

"Please let me finish! Shvindler has written that the human brain evolved to its present capacity in the Neanderthal man. Just like you, the primitive man had to remember a million unconnected details. But Ryazantsev has his own language, his own system of logic. I'll bet he can even calculate faster than a machine. He's evolutionally advanced!"

"Evolutionally deranged, you mean," the man in suede remarked derisively. "If he's so brilliant, why hasn't he been elected to the academy?"

"Ho-o, I'm sure that if you were in his place you'd have been elected long ago. You'd already be riding around in a chauffeured

limousine. But it's impossible for him. He and others like him have a highly developed ethical conscience. Ever heard of the word 'ethics'? The fifty-fourth theorem of Shvindler, the Theorem of Ethics: the subsequent evolution of language, and together with it the next stage of human evolution, are not possible before a prior advance in the development of ethics."

"Ryazantsev cannot tolerate the slightest coercion. And all you can talk about is the academy, the academy... Can't you see what you've done? Now he'll never come, never! And there's a chance he might not even have anything more to do with me after this. Ah, it's pointless talking with you..."

This was the scene that took place when Kalmykov called Vasily Stepanovich into his office and told him about his baffling telephone conversation with Ryazantsev. The meek junior scientific worker, forsaking all hopes of a raise, ranted and raved at his impressive boss.

It was Mikhail Petrovich's turn to work the night shift. This was an ordinary occurrence with the programmers: the computer could not stand idle. As he prepared to leave for the office, he noticed suddenly that Olga Sergeyevna seemed a bit sallowish and pale, and that she was coughing and limping more noticeably than usual. He said nothing to his wife as he left—they were not in the habit of saying goodbye to one another—but as he

walked out the door the thought occurred to him that she was probably sick. And once again he caught himself thinking in the external language.

The computer room was empty and cool as it always was in the evenings. Mikhail Petrovich liked working the night shift and always reported for duty uncomplainingly: it was easier to concentrate at night, and his job didn't interfere with his work. Scarcely had he sat down to work when the door creaked open and assistant director Sarkisyan walked into the room. It was because of Sarkisyan that Ryazantsev had vacillated for such a long time about whether or not to quit his job designing chemical combines.

Who knew—if Ludwig Avetisovich had been his boss fifteen years earlier, Ryazantsev might not have had to change his place of work so many times. Sarkisyan had a way of asking "How are you feeling?" without the slightest hint of affectation. If he assigned a task, it always turned out that it wasn't really a task at all, but a request which no one but Ryazantsev could fulfill. In a word, he was shrewd and discerning, even though he hadn't the least understanding of computer languages, not to mention internal ones.

After greeting him, Sarkisyan proceeded to bring up the subject of the Belorechensk project which was plaguing the entire institute. This was the third year they had been working on it, but there was still no optimal version. And if they failed to come up with a solution by tomorrow noon, all would be

lost. Their only hope lay in cybernetics. Yes, he knew the computer was antiquated: it would take two days for it to process the amount of data involved here. It was time they made an effort to acquire a new one. But in the meantime, he had to help them out of this fix. He had no clue as to how, but it was common knowledge that Mikhail Petrovich could work miracles.

Ludwig Avetisovich subtly added that the task involved not only finding the optimal version, but required taking into account both the cantankerous demands of the oil industry, and the considerations put forth in a letter by Kuzmin from the central directorate, as well as the instructions relayed by the deputy minister over the phone. It was a bit much, of course, to expect a rectilinear functioning machine to process all of this. And God only knew how it could be done by tomorrow morning. Even Einstein himself, most likely, could not have coped with it. But nonetheless everyone had their hopes set on him, Mikhail Petrovich.

Sarkisyan said all this in a leisurely fashion, and yet his monologue lasted no more than one minute: his sense of rhythm was flawless. He made his request, smiled, even wrapped his arms around Ryazantsev's shoulders, and then left.

This was the opportunity for Ryazantsev to begin what Vasily Stepanovich ceremoniously called the Great Test. He opened the window and switched off the remote control panel. Then he began to concentrate.

He succeeded quickly in proving the *limbering-up* theorem. But when it came time to switch over to the base information, instead of the Belorechensk project he saw the face of Olga Sergeyevna before him. And then for no reason at all he thought about his mother, and she had the same, worried expression on her face. He recalled the smell of her room—the smell of an old, lived-in building, totally unfamiliar to residents of concrete machines for habitation. And many other things, possessing neither names nor values in the internal language, crept into his head.

And finally he thought of the expression "buy one's way out", of little significance in the internal language, but in the external—Mikhail Petrovich suddenly realized this with chilling clarity—was sapping his wretched life to the marrow. Who needed his consuming work if in the course of his forty-two years he had never made one living soul happy, had never even thought to have children, and if he had never talked about anything more important than shelves on the balcony with the shy woman who lived for him alone? Shvindler's theorems were obviously a fabrication, the product of a fertile imagination—all, that is, but the fifty-fourth. The Theorem of Ethics.

Ryazantsev made another effort to regain his concentration. He did several breathing exercises that he had learned from Vasily Stepanovich, but the internal language did not come back to him. He had no choice but to switch the computer back on and reach for the telephone receiver. He knew, fortu-

nately, that Vasily Stepanovich was also working at the computer that evening.

"You were deeply mistaken about me regarding fifty-three," he pronounced hollowly into the receiver.

"Impossible," his friend replied in an alarmed voice. "Are you trying to say it doesn't fit?"

"That's right. And it can't fit, so to speak, in the sense of fifty-four. I'm not that individual; I haven't evolved that far. And in general, it's all a pile of nonsense." Mikhail Petrovich discovered in himself the ability to grin mirthlessly.

"No need to despair," Vasily Stepanovich hastened to assure him. "That happens sometimes. *Kiai* doesn't come all the time."

"What does your *kiai* have to do with this? I've got no use for your dialects—I'm just beginning to understand the Russian language. What I need to know is whether or not your main computer is being used," Ryazantsev interrupted him.

"Today it's free," his friend replied dejectedly.

"Then let me plug into it..."

In the institute where Vasily Stepanovich worked it was strictly forbidden to allow outsiders to plug into the main computer. Ryazantsev knew this, but had suddenly realized that he could not let Sarkisyan down. The main computer could come up with the optimal version in two hours time.

Vasily Stepanovich had never known Ryazantsev to ask anyone for anything. "To hell

with Kalmykov," he thought to himself, and said simply to his friend:

"I'm turning it on."

Now Mikhail Petrovich had two free hours remaining. He locked up the computer room and ran outside to the neighboring courtyard. The store was already closed, but near the service entrance a hefty fellow in a striped vest with a filterless cigarette dangling from his mouth was unloading some sort of crates.

"Excuse me please," Ryazantsev addressed him, "is there any chance I could get hold of a carton of milk?"

"Now that beats all," the fellow replied. "And I thought you were after a bottle of beer."

"No, just milk. My wife is sick."

"Hold on a minute..." The hefty fellow disappeared through the door and returned a minute later with a crumpled carton. Ryazantsev proffered him a rouble.

"Forget it, buddy," the young fellow said, lighting up another cigarette. "Are you crazy? Put it back in your pocket. Go on home to your old lady."

And suddenly everything was simple and easy, as never before in his life. New simple words and formulas rose up from the dull depths of incomprehension. This was not some mysterious, forgotten internal language, but words even a child could understand. Sensing their unarmed but durable strength, Ryazantsev instantly invested in them both

the problems of Hilbert, and the Belorechensk project, and much more, still unknown even to him.

And that last rouble came in handy. Near the tram stop an elderly flower vendor appeared from out of nowhere. And as he ran towards her, Ryazantsev realized suddenly that he was buying flowers for the first time in his life.

ARKADY MIRER

THE OBSIDIAN KNIFE

"I envy you your health," my neighbor said without raising his head.

We were sitting on a dirty street bench. The deserted boulevard was covered with a thick layer of melting snow. With his heel my neighbor gouged out a hole in the icy snow, his broad face with its broken nose swaying slightly back and forth. His gloved hand rested against the planks of the bench.

"Health is a wonderful thing," my neighbor said through tightly pressed lips.

I took another look around just to make sure there was no one standing behind the bench. No one was there... Last year's leaves stood out darkly against the gray snow, and a small stream purled along the side path.

"Are you speaking to me?" I muttered.

My neighbor nodded his head and continued to dig up the snow with his heel. Water was already beginning to fill the hole.

For another few minutes he stared at his shoes with their ribbed soles, while I examined him, waiting for him to continue.

My God, what a strange character he was! He had the face of a retired boxer—broken nose, flattened ear, and demented, motionless eyes. Such eyes should belong to a scientist or someone desperately, hopelessly in love. I had never seen a person who resembled either one less in his overall appearance—except for his eyes. And then his words—"I envy you your health, it's a wonderful thing..." And his pose! He sat there with his enormous hands propped against the bench, the bicepts of his left arm bulging out against his coat sleeve. It was as if he was ready to leap up any second and rush off somewhere, but his heel rhythmically gouged the snow, and the melting water was already flowing out from underneath the bench in a little rivulet—joining with the stream flowing along the path behind our backs.

"Are you ill?" I asked, unable to endure the silence any longer.

"I'm not well enough," he replied, casting a fleeting, scalding glance at me. And without the slightest pause he asked: "Did you have any childhood diseases?"

I almost chuckled at the unexpected question—such a heavyweight asking questions about childhood diseases. Answering him: "measles, mumps, whooping-cough", I thought

of how he reminded me of Yura Abramov, a boy from our courtyard who no longer cried by the time he started kindergarten, was a regular dare-devil in school, and who we all looked up to. In the eighth grade Yura got his nose broken. He told all the teachers that he was taking boxing lessons, but we knew that he had been beaten up in a street fight. In general, all people with broken noses are pretty much alike.

"Is your heart in good shape?" my neighbor continued in a tone of voice almost indifferent, but not to the point that I could joke my way out or say: "And what is it to you?" I had no choice but to reply half-jokingly:

"Works like a pump."

"Athlete?"

"First class in box, second in foil; soccer, swimming."

"What about running? What distances? Sprinter? Of course, a sprinter..." He glanced down at my legs.

In full countenance he was not bad looking at all—moderately broad cheekbones, a forehead like a helmet—only his eyes frightened me. They were big and bulging, and literally glowed from within.

"Do you smoke?"

"Sometimes, why?"

All at once I felt a surge of irritation intermingled with boredom. Are you a smoker or not... Every trainer begins with that question. Dare-devil... I felt the urge to leave; it was starting to grow chilly towards evening. And

I didn't think that Natalya would show up now. She had said that she'd come if she could skip out of her lecture, but she probably wouldn't be coming.

I said: "Excuse me. It's time for me to go," and stood up.

My neighbor nodded his head. From beneath his heel sprays of water went flying out across the path.

"Goodbye," I said very politely.

A long-legged young girl with a jump rope glanced around at us as she went running along the path.

"Too bad," my neighbor said. "I wanted to make you an interesting proposition."

His nose and ears spoke louder than any billboard of what he could propose. I replied:

"Thanks, but I'm not in training. I'm working on my diploma..."

He frowned.

I had already stepped across the puddle onto the path when he said in a lifeless voice:

"I wanted to offer you a journey in time..."

I glanced around in fright. He still sat there in the same pose.

"A journey in time. Into the past..."

"So, a journey into the past," I thought. "So that's what he meant by not well enough..."

"I'm not crazy," came the words from underneath his hat. "A crazy person would have offered you a journey into the future."

I sat back down on the bench, in the same spot as before. His insane logic had overwhelmed me. He was obviously mad, now I could tell it by his clothes—excessively, even

austerely neat. Everything was of good quality, not overly worn, but terribly outdated. His wife probably took care of his clothes to make sure he looked presentable, but never bought him anything new. And so the poor guy was still going around wearing his wardrobe of better times gone by. Coats like that, and shoes too, for that matter, were worn back in the fifties. And his hat, I remember, although I was still little—a hat like a flat pan with a round cake on it.

He slid his big eyes over me and seemed to chuckle, but his eyes remained unchanged.

"I very rarely leave my apartment. Did that thought occur to you? No time, a bad heart... Listen," he turned around cumbersomely on the bench, "I really do need an absolutely healthy person for a journey into the twentieth millennium B. C."

He said this and then fastened his extraordinary gaze upon me. From under his brows, as if he were hypnotizing me. But none of it was even necessary. I had already decided to take up his offer. My sports training had come into play—I wanted to overcome my fear. And then it was all so strange.

Behind all this was the lure of an adventure, and its intense alarm sounded in the rustling of tires beyond the trees, in the smell of the sun-warmed melting snow, in the measured cries of the crow by the old nest. For some reason I asked:

"What, have you built a time machine or something?"

"Something like that, but not entirely."

...As we walked out from the boulevard he ran his hand lightly over the little girl's blue hat—she stood there with the jump rope stuffed in her mouth. I had the feeling she had overheard our wild conversation. At any rate, she followed behind us, tripping lightly along like a baby chicken, and fell behind only at the third intersection, by the confectioner's shop. There were telephone booths there, and I asked if this ... journey would take long, in which case I would call home and let them know I would be late.

He said:

"Don't worry. The first test will take an hour, hour and a half. Depending on what coordinates one uses as a frame of reference."

He walked along the edge of the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets, with the same blank expression as on the boulevard. I noticed that almost all the passers-by stepped aside to make way for us.

Near the entrance to a grey stone building he stopped and began to grope around in his pockets, and at that very second a young woman came running out. Her coat was thrown open and her curly head held scornfully high, an air of insult on her pretty face. She muttered something to herself and then stopped all of a sudden, her gaze fixed upon the blunt-toed shoes of my companion. He raised his shoulders. The air of insult had disappeared from her face, but in its place was such obvious astonishment that I had to grin. With a sudden wave of her hand she darted off again on her way. The crowd flowing round us

immediately swallowed her up, and my strange companion strode towards the entrance.

Standing shoulder to shoulder in the cramped elevator, we ascended to the sixth floor. When you're standing next to someone in such closer quarters, it's awkward to carry on a conversation. You're forced to stare at the walls or the rules of operation and remain awkwardly silent. Neatly etched on the wall of this elevator near the dispatcher's loudspeaker was the word "Balyk's*". In capital letters. Why *balyk*? This struck me as terribly amusing, and all of a sudden I remembered. He had said: "I'd be crazy if I had offered you a journey into the future."

I stood there with a frozen smile on my face and felt as if I were the crazy one. Why had I believed him, why had I come? I had studied the theory of relativity, and it was stated there that a trip into the future was feasible, but into the past—impossible... Everything was backwards here... It was impossible to return to the past, because the future could not act upon the past. "So there's balyk for you," I thought to myself, simply fuming with anger. "When the door opens, I'll say goodbye and leave. And that's it. He's obviously some sort of nut, obviously."

"The thing is," he said, opening the door of the elevator, "that a journey into the future is possible at speeds less than that of light. In outer space. I'm afraid that mankind will never attain such speeds."

**Balyk*—cured fillet of sturgeon, etc.—*Tr.*

The elevator went rumbling below. I followed him submissively into the apartment and allowed him to remove my coat.

"Wipe off your feet," he mumbled off to the side. "Wash your hands before you set," he added with a laugh, and his nose flattened out entirely, giving his face the appearance of a flat pancake. "Please..."

At that moment I spied a black cat stalking towards us, it's quivering tail bent like a poker.

"Vaska, come here you rascal," his master said, picking him up into his arms. The cat began to purr. "Come in, please..."

Now, in a snugly fitting jacket and narrow trousers, he looked exactly like a sportsman. His rib cage was simply monstrous, like a barrel. The chest of a gorilla. He had somehow inconspicuously changed into slippers, and in his entire appearance stuck out from his surroundings. An enormous desk, armchairs, bookshelves... I had seen a similar study at the apartment of our professor Danilin when I had gone there to take a make-up exam in a strength of materials course.

We sat down in the high-backed armchairs, and my host fell silent once again. Perched in his lap, the cat began to purr louder and louder and then suddenly let out a hoarse, low-pitched "me-o-o-w-w-...", jumped down from his lap and went tearing out of the room.

"That's Yegor howling, scaring Vaska. Take a look."

Between the two wide compartments of the desk was stretched a wire mesh screen, and behind it, as if in a cape, stood a large

black cat with its back arched and glowing yellow eyes.

"Yegor," its master said, "poor kitty..."

"Ur-a-a-u-u," the cat responded and then hissed.

"This is Vaska's twin," my host explained matter-of-factly. As if in every home there was one cat that walked about at liberty and another, its twin Yegor, that was caged up beneath the desk. "By the way, let me introduce myself. Romuald Petrovich Grishin."

"Very pleased," I mumbled. "Dima Berbenev."

"Dima, Dima... I knew someone by that name... Dima. Oh well, it's not important anyway. Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I don't really feel like it now."

"All the better," Grishin said.

If his purpose was to frighten me, he had succeeded in doing so. I sat there and looked into his eyes like a mouse fallen prey to a cat. It was utterly impossible to break away from their gaze, and yet looking into them filled my heart with a feeling of oppressive horror. His eyes shone with the tension of thought. With the agonizingly intense calmness of all-knowingness. There was no other way of explaining it.

"...All the better. One last question, and then I'll be all yours. What institute will you be graduating from?"

"Engineering and Physics."

"Wonderful. That'll make our communication easier. Now you can ask whatever questions you'd like."

"I don't even know what to ask..."

"I understand. You have doubts and are waiting for explanations. You'll get them. Classical physics states that the future cannot act upon the past. Totally logical, it would seem, but the formulation is not sufficiently general. To put it in a more general form: information can be transmitted only along the vector of time, but not against the direction of the vector. For example. If we take an object existing in the past and put in its place some object from the present, but exactly the same in every respect, then there will be no transmission of information. Such a substitution corresponds to zero information—material objects correspond exactly to one another. Otherwise... Otherwise this is what happens... Let's take the black cat Yegor as our material object. Twenty thousand years ago there were no black cats. There were striped cats, short-tailed hunters. Wild or half-wild. Therefore it would be impossible for either Yegor or Vaska to appear in the past—that would be information from the future. If we had some sort of wild cat then that would be a different matter. Do you understand?"

I answered:

"No, I don't."

I was being a bit disingenuous, but I couldn't respond any other way. He had implicated to begin with that there was a certain possibility of penetrating into the past just as effortlessly as descending a staircase from the seventh floor to the first, and therefore all his subsequent logic lost its meaning. Penetrate into

the past... After all, the past has already *passed*, that's the reason it's the past. Trees grow tall and then topple down, people and grasses rot away... The past!

"Granite," Romuald Petrovich said. "There's a chunk of granite lying before you on the table. That chunk is the unaltered past. It belongs wholly to the past. Trees die, but granite remains..."

There was nothing I could say to refute that. It was the tenth time he had anticipated my objections. I could only shrug my shoulders.

"...But we've gotten off the track. And so, Yegor cannot *appear* in the past. But that does not mean that he cannot be sent into the past. You don't see it? Hm... Take a closer look at Yegor. Here's a lamp."

I took the table lamp and bent down. I expected to see a devil with horns, anything, only not what I saw.

In the light Yegor turned out to be striped and short-tailed. There were tiny tufts of fur on the tips of his ears.

I gasped. Yegor hissed and sank his claws into the mesh. I almost dropped the lamp.

"What kind of animal is that?"

"Yegor, the black cat," my host pronounced distinctly. "On February fifteenth of this year he was transferred into the one hundred and ninetieth century before our era. In one hour's time he returned looking like this... Poor kitty! In his own internal system of reckoning only twelve, seventeen minutes passed."

"I think it's time for me to leave," I said for the third time in the past hour. "I don't like practical jokes."

My host rose heavily from his armchair. He didn't even appear to have heard me. The words rebounded from him like tennis balls rebounding from a concrete wall.

"That's a shame. By the way... I wouldn't dare try to take up any more of your time... A real shame. But the cat... From there information passes through freely. I didn't think that the genotype of the cat had been altered. The differences were not that many—a fraction of a percent, within the framework of mutations." He sidled towards the door, his head bowed.

It seemed as if he had finally resigned himself to my leaving. He even wanted for me to be gone as quickly as possible, but the devil prompted me to turn back around at parting.

On the desk, next to the chunk of granite, lay a large obsidian knife, the kind one often sees in museums. The knife looked absolutely new. Its blade was shiny and had chips which appeared to have been recently made. Stuck to the handle was a piece of reddish clay.

In two swift strides I walked over to the desk and stopped, not daring to pick up the knife. It was indeed absolutely new, and not simply wiped clean. The clay was spongy and dense. The semi-transparent blade appeared sharp, sharper than a scalpel. The first thought that entered my mind was that it was a fake. Very cleverly and skilfully done. I picked up the knife, all the same. The blade shone with

tiny semi-circular chips of varying sizes, and at its tin were almost invisible small half-moons. I brought the knife up to eye-level and ran my eye down the blade—it was perfectly, ideally symmetrical. No, in this day and age such work was impossible. Things like this were done slowly, over a long period of time...

As if in response to this last thought, Romuald Petrovich uttered a sound that was something strangely between a groan and a grunt. And in this sound I caught a note of impatience as well. I turned around. He stood in the middle of the room, his eyes closed, his hands at his sides, panting like a boxer after a knock-out.

"Just a minute..." With his eyes still shut, he sank down in the armchair by the desk.

Yegor clawed at the mesh, attempting to get at his slippers, the unextinguished lamp still shone in broad daylight, and I watched in total dismay as Romuald Petrovich with stiffened fingers opened a little bottle and shook out of it a pill. He swallowed it and once again began to breathe. His breathing was hoarse and laboured. Finally he opened his eyes and said with difficulty:

"My heart acts up every now and then. I'm sorry. Were you interested in the knife? That's my trophy. Three days ago I spent five minutes in the past. By that alarm clock."

"Romuald Petrovich!" I wailed so desperately that the accursed cat let out a hiss and crouched in the corner. "Don't try to play tricks on me! Tell me that you're joking!"

He shook his head slightly:

"Ah, Dima... You consider me insane and yet you're calling upon my sincerity. Illogical..."

I know it may sound banal or sentimental, but I will remember for the rest of my life the way he sat there, his boxer's hands resting on the desk next to the knife, and gazed at a small picture hanging slightly to the right above the corner of the desk. A summer sky with a solitary white cloud, and beneath it a deep crimson field of clover and a young girl with a white kerchief on her head...

He gazed and gazed at that picture, while I was powerless to leave and finally sat down quietly in the unoccupied armchair, sideways, so as not to see the cat that had visited the past and the knife brought back from the past.

Grishin turned to me with a smile and then winked all of a sudden.

"So you're still waiting for explanations?"

"Yes."

"Shall we give it another try? Let's do. I'll give you a direct analogy. We often hear the expression: 'Children are our future.' You're still young, but for a man of my age children are hope for immortality. Descendants... Children and the children of our children... Now imagine that in the past we exist as our own ancestors... It's one and the same, in essence—descendants in the future, and in the past—ancestors. The transformation into descendants is a natural process. Reproduction and death. It's irreversible. But for the reverse process special devices are required." He burst into a laugh. "Honest to God, I myself

hardly believe it. This discovery is dangerous! Remember in *Tom Sawyer* when the doggie found a stinging beetle in a church and lay down on top of it? And the beetle just attached itself to the dog's belly. Anyway, back to the main thing—the reverse transition: life—death—life. Understand?"

I shrugged my shoulders, still wary.

"Let's put it this way ... a stone knife is transferred through time without the transitions of life—death—life. It is already both the ancestor and the descendant. With living beings it's a bit more complicated, but even that I managed to master. At the cost of losses and damages, but nonetheless..."

"And so Yegor is an example of those losses and damages?"

"Now you've got it!" he exclaimed elatedly. "You've got it! At last we've made some progress! It turns out that twenty thousand years ago the ancestor of our cats was still wild. Maybe half-wild, but a wild beast just the same. Striped, predatory, and all the rest. Yes... The first experiment. I was still inexperienced; it's all so complex, you know. The first steps... I sent him back on the express through time and forgot that information passes unhindered from the past. The most interesting thing is that he remembers me somewhat, but remembers Vaska well. Right now he's angry because of you. Poor Yegor, poor, poor kitty! Came back all striped, poor thing."

The cat purred and then, as if suddenly recalling something, let out a howl: "U-u-u!"

"You see? A split personality. Now I've learned the proper way to travel back and forth ..."

I was expecting him to say: "as you see," but I was wrong. He had probably decided not to bring up his own experiment until I was totally convinced.

I looked at the back of his close-cropped head, his powerful hands and gorilla's chest and thought... It was an idiotic thought that sent my head spinning.

"Romuald Petrovich, there's something I'd like to ask. Twenty thousand years ago man was also different. How does that work? If you were there..."

"Why aren't I a Sinanthropus?" He burst out laughing without turning around. There was little mirth in his laughter. "The thing is that the homo sapiens species has been in existence for seventy thousand years. And a homo sapiens is a homo sapiens, Dima. The brain hasn't changed, almost nothing has changed. An altogether different matter is how a savage ape-man was able to acquire such a brain. That's the mystery... But that is not the issue here. The thing is that man has not changed. On the second shelf from the bottom there's a red volume by Willis called *The Paradox of the Brain.* Take it and open it up to page two hundred and seven. Or take any book from that row."

"No, that's all right. I believe it. Homo sapiens, you say."

"Judge for yourself. Man is no more than four to five hundred generations removed

from that time. He hasn't had a chance to change—in the evolutionary sense."

"What about individual qualities," I asked, "such as external appearance, habits, education even? Does that work according to the same law—the influence of the past upon the future?.."

All of a sudden he sang out softly: "Don't stir up mem-or-ies of days gone by, days gone by," and opened up one of the desk drawers.

"Good question, good question," he said, nodding his head with satisfaction and rummaging through the drawer. "Now I'll have to show you, I'll have to... Here it is! Don't rekindle by-gone de-sires..." he sang out again.

I found myself holding a photograph. A gallant sergeant with a cockade on his peak-cap stared straight ahead, his powerful, bulging chest decorated with medals of bravery. A broken nose jutted out victoriously above his thick moustache.

"Very interesting," I said, placing the photograph on the table. "Did you fight in World War Two?"

The singing broke off abruptly.

"My God! What were you looking at, anyway? Did you see this?" Now his entire manner of address had changed, and he spoke familiarly, less guardedly.

"This, right here." He pointed his finger at one of the medals. "This is the badge of the military order, the St. George's Cross." My grandfather was a fully ribboned holder of the cross."

"Your grandfather? What a mascarade! It's you!"

"Of course it's me..." He snorted derisively. "Take another look. This time more closely."

I took the photograph from his hands. It was pasteboard! Why hadn't I noticed it before? Solid pasteboard the color of sepia, a vignette and an inscription: "Photograph by N. L. Sokolov. Smolensk."

"Take a look on the back..."

I read: "Cossack N. C. O. Nikifor Grishin, 1922/III/06." An incredible resemblance!

He snorted once again, muttered something and then pulled a claret-coloured identification card out of his pocket. It was a pass.

"Open it up!"

"Grishin, Romuald Petrovich"... Seal. Everything as it should be.

But the photograph *was not the same*—a rather puny, intellectual-looking man in glasses. Young and somehow reminiscent of my host, but obviously not him—only the forehead and eyes were similar. A different chin, cheekbones... And the ears weren't flattened out; they stuck out in different directions, and the nose wasn't broken...

"I don't understand you," I said with all the decisiveness I could muster. "Why are you doing this to me... Just who are you? You're not Grishin—that's an entirely different man on the pass. Who are you?"

"Grishin. Romuald Petrovich. Psychiatrist, if you please."

"I don't believe it."

"As you like. Then who am I in your opinion?"

"That's what I want to clarify. Why are you passing yourself off as someone else?"

"Ah, Dima, Dima! That photograph of my grandfather is certified by an official government seal. Some Cossack regiment. That is Grishin there; what do you think? Do you deny the resemblance?"

"I don't believe it," I said. "It's a fake."

"That's a pernicious habit," he said softly, "to believe a document more than a person. A destructive habit. As a result, you don't believe anything, even a document..."

I let his remark slip by and asked the main question:

"Why are you doing all this? Answer me! And you can drop your crazy act!"

I braced myself in order to knock him down if he attempted to leap up and attack me. He was heavier than me, but then I was some twenty years younger and in excellent physical shape. I decided resolutely that I wouldn't give him a chance to even turn around.

And once again he parried my thought, the way a goal-keeper returns a ball before it's even gotten further than the corner of the penalty area. He said:

"Dima, I have no intention of attacking you. I have no weapons. Here are my hands, on the table."

"Why do you read others' thoughts? Who..."

"Gives me the right? You do, who else? You think in stereotypes, and everything is written

on your face. From a physicist I expected more ... more subtlety of intellect. According to the logic of a detective novel, right now I should make an attempt to finish you off—am I right?

"Well, yes..."

"They teach you poorly in your institute," he said fiercely. "They don't teach you logic! I looked the way I do on the pass before the experiment," he stated, picking up the pass by one corner. "I looked like that, understand?"

I shuddered—the pass fell onto the desk and flapped shut with a faint thump, while Romuald Petrovich suddenly muttered something unintelligible and plaintive and looked back around. His eyes seemed to be staring out from behind a mask.

It was then that I became totally horror-stricken. The same thing once happened to me during a mascarade at kindergarten. Wolves' masks with gnashing fangs covered sweet, familiar faces, and I had to strain every nerve and clench my fists in order to make out these faces, while all around were wolves, foxes, and squint-eyed rabbits...

The living mask shifted around helpless eyes... I shouted:

"No!"

He looked up at the picture once again. The young girl in the field of clover beneath the broad sky. He said:

"No need to get frightened. My experiment, my risk. As you see, in proposing this experiment I am concealing nothing from you."

"No, I'm not doing it..."

"Scared?"

I remained silent.

"I can understand. Of course it's scary. But now I can guarantee your safety. I found a method of returning—after the incident with Yegor. Vaska has already come back in a series of separate passages through time... Step by step, understand? Along the entire ladder of his ancestors. It worked out well. He's a cat like any other. You saw him. And then I made a large wristband and journeyed back myself, but it ended badly... In our family heart diseases are hereditary..."

He kept staring at the picture. Perhaps his grandfather had loved this girl ... or his father? Or maybe it was a totally strange girl. I don't know...

"You see, Dima, time is blurred when you're travelling through it the way railroad ties appear when you're looking at them from the window of a moving train. For some microseconds I was simultaneously in the second generation, and the first, and in the present. It was just my luck that inside those very microseconds I had a violent attack, with convulsions, and when I fell from the chair the wristband was torn from my wrist. The process halted. Fortunately, it affected only my external appearance..." He brought his palm up to his maimed ear. "I never engaged in boxing. Never. Granddad Nikifor was a circus wrestler and a boxer."

I asked idiotically:

"What about your job? Did they recognize you?"

He placed his palm on his chest:

"What job!.. According to my reckoning, I have only ... a little time remaining. If I can finish what I've started I'll be satisfied."

He rose, massive as a hippopotamus, and raised the hem of his jacket.

"Look, Dima... I don't have time to buy new clothes."

His shirt, the same one as on the pass, had been cut crookedly down the back and gaped open, revealing a blue undershirt.

Standing before me with his jacket still pulled up, he said hoarsely:

"My heart won't bear up beneath another experiment. The strain on the heart is considerable. But you're a healthy man, Dima."

I could not believe now that he was lying, that he was not Romuald Grishin, but an impostor who had stolen his clothing and his pass. No, this wasn't all that simple, and his laboured breathing was real—something like that couldn't be faked. Watching him sit back down in his chair, I felt an anguished surge of terror, such as after an irreversible misfortune. Why had I arranged to meet Natalya; I knew she was busy, and why had I arranged for us to meet on the boulevard, and not in a cafe, and why had I entered into a conversation with him? Why, why... I was ashamed of my thoughts, so trifling was my misfortune in comparison to his. After all, I could get up right now and go wherever I wished.

And yet my cowardice pushed me back to my previous train of thought, and I mumbled desperately:

"They're dead. They're all dead. And buried," I added for some reason. It seemed more final that way. "Dead and buried."

"And the stars?" the man at the desk asked. "Are the stars dead too? The invisible stars, shrinking in a period of fifteen minutes by their time and millions of years by ours? Are they also buried? Is Lenin dead? Is Einstein buried? Tolstoy? Who is alive then? General Franco?"

He banged both fists on the desk and asked in a deep bass which drowned out the bestial howl emanating from behind the wire mesh:

"What do you believe in? You, a physicist? In what clocks? A collapsing star exists fifteen minutes, and it will still be shining above the terrestrial wasteland when the Sun no longer rises! Millions of years from now! What do you believe in?"

"I don't know!" I shouted. "I'm not a scientist! What do you want of me?"

"I want you to believe."

"In what?"

"In the past next to the future. Throughout all time."

"But it's impossible to bring back the past!"

"Quiet, Yegor!" Grishin shouted.

The cat quieted down. Grishin extricated himself from behind the desk and planted himself, like a monument, in the middle of the room.

"The past cannot be brought back. But it's possible to learn about the past, which is what I'm proposing. It's completely safe. There's no danger of anything going wrong; you're

healthy and strong. Make up your mind—if you don't want to do it, then leave. And I'll go and find someone else."

"A-a..." A sort of rallying cry suddenly burst from my lips, like when you're racing down a mountain slope on heavy skis strapped firmly to your feet.

"A-a! We're off on the slalom through time! We're off, Romuald Petrovich!"

"We're off!" Grishin thumped me on the shoulder. It was great—I collapsed in the armchair, while he stood over me smiling from ear to ear.

...Before the "launch-off into time" I drank some coffee. Romuald Petrovich brought out a coffee-pot and two small cups, but I asked for a mug, stirred in some sugar, and began to drink while Grishin explained how the safety mechanisms worked.

"There are two inductor-wristbands, Dima. The main one and a back-up. The return signal is given by two clocks, fashioned from chess clocks—they're right here, ticking away. I'll set them for one half hour. Is that enough? There time is compressed..."

"Give me a bit longer," I said.

How good I felt! I had overcome my fear, and felt so important and courageous! Just think—flattening the mugs of a gang of ruffians or skiing down steep Afonin ravine was just child's play compared to this. I sat there like a cosmonaut before take-off, drinking strong coffee and thinking about what it would be like afterwards, and that at last I had found a true test for myself. And Grishin

was terribly excited, although he too tried not to show it. When I was already sitting in the armchair with the wristbands on my arms, he brought over Vaska and, gripping him in his enormous hands, told me that just yesterday the cat had travelled into the past.

"As you see, everything was successful... Well, good luck, Dima. You're a brave man."

I was unable to muster up a smile—I had lost my nerve. I felt the warm wristbands on my arms and suddenly they disappeared, together with the sensation of aliveness, and I gasped for breath, as if I had received a blow in the solar plexus... The hammer of time struck a blow into my heart, and in mortal terror I realized that I had forgotten to ask how one who has gone back in time looks.

...Alien. Alien smell. Unknown.

I'm lying down. I hear the cry of a bird, closer, closer. It flew down from its nest. An alien, horrible smell. I'm lying among large leaves. Alone. Droplets are falling from my forehead.

It's terrifying.

The wind is blowing from them. They are approaching, many of them. Aliens. They're coming quietly, like the Big Tooth. They've walked out into the open; they're looking around. They're coming. They're hiding from the Great Fire. They're coming. Along the edge of the swamp. My stomach is churning from the smell.

A hunter is coming. Another hunter. Still another. Many of them. But less than the fingers on a hand. They're carrying hand axes.

Like us. But the smell is alien. Horrible. Water is dripping from my forehead; it smells, but the wind is blowing from them. They won't smell me.

The leader springs and strikes with his hand axe. He killed a snake. The smell is very strong. They're afraid. They're afraid of snakes, like us. The pit of my stomach churns from the smell.

They're walking past. The smell is gone. Now they have the advantage. I drag my bow through the leaves.

An alien must be killed. All aliens must be killed. Aliens are more dreadful than snakes, the dark, and the Big Teeth. They don't smell like us. They must be killed. I can't do it alone; there are too many of them. My people don't hear me. They're far away.

I've caught up to them. The aliens are sitting; they've hidden themselves. They're looking around. The Great Fire has covered them with its blotches. They're lying down. The leader is sitting, looking around, sniffing the air. Alien. We don't sniff the air like that. We raise our heads.

I'm lying in a swamp. I'm picking off leeches. My bow is lying on dry leaves. The alien is sniffing the wind; there are fish bones in his beard. His beard is like the night wind. Paa had a black beard. The fathers killed Paa. He did something to make creatures run over the walls. Small ones: the brother of Big Horn, but small. It was lying there and not running. On the wall. And the Big-nosed brothers on the wall. The fathers

killed Paa. They said it was frightening. They left the cave. Left it to the creatures. The Big-nosed brothers are going through the woods. They're going to the river to drink. They're passing by like on the wall Paa made. A big-big-big one going in front. The twigs are crackling under their feet.

I'm crawling backwards to the small river. I'm running through the water. The smell of the aliens follows after me. Aliens must be killed. Because they're aliens. Here is the cave. The fathers are sitting behind the rocks. They're holding bows, looking around. I'm running across the rocks. I see that the mothers and sisters are hiding in the cave. I feel good. They're my kind; they hear me. What I say inside when we're close. Old Kikha and the elder mothers beat the young ones and drive them inside the cave. Little brother Zaa pulls a leech from my leg, eats it. Our mother drives him into the cave.

I take my arrows. The women close off the entrance with stones. It grows dark, like before the death of the Great Fire. Sister Tim touches me, and my fear passes. I say: "Not now; we're going to kill." "Now!" She bends forward, I grab her tightly. Mother Kii kicks me. She kicks Tim. A man I would have killed with my hand-axe, but I cannot touch Kii. Tim howls in the corner like Big Tooth's mate. The children squeal. Old Kikha hisses like a snake: "Quiet! Aliens!"

We're running through the water. In the place where the water falls, we run out into the forest. Pkaap-kap and his brothers run

further ahead, towards the swamp. Pkaap-kap is six-fingered. He has much power. Mother Kii did not let the men kill him. Any six-fingered should be killed. It's good they didn't kill him.

The wind brings the smell of the aliens. We run out from the large leaves—there are many-many of us. We run out. The aliens leap up and shout shrilly, like birds. They run swiftly, their hand-axes on their shoulders. The aliens have very swift feet. But Yuti cries: "Ee-ha-a-a!" There are many arrows. The arrows reach the leader; he is running. Others fall. The leader lurches, pulls an arrow from his body. He looks. He falls. His beard raises up towards the Great Fire. "E-e-ha-ha-a!" Yuti shouts.

I run and raise my axe over the leader and see how our people are beating and hacking with their axes, but something crushes my chest, and as if through a haze I watch the grey axe fall and hang suspended above the black-bearded one. He is wailing like an owl, and now it's already over ... now, now...

...I was sitting in softness, I was trembling and gasping from the sharp pain in my chest and thighs. This was an armchair, this was the present once again, and there were wristbands on my arms and a necktie constricting my throat. Something was jumping inside my chest, like a grey stone. A voice carried to me from outside—a familiar voice and a familiar smell, but I was unable to make sense of it.

Then I stood up. The pain let off, so I could breathe and open my eyes, and I breathed in the smell of the present—dust, benzene, cat's fur—and I saw the shining mesh of the microphone and a white hairless face and did not recognize it. The alien stood before me, squeezing together his dancing lips, and shoved a shiny object towards me which—I knew—was called a microphone. The alien scrutinized me, mumbled something soothing. Incomprehensible. Alien.

I stood there and focused on the pain, as if there were two of us. I—the one who knew the word "microphone" and much more that was unnecessary now—focused on the second "I", who knew nothing but pain and horror, who knew and was ready to kill in order to defend his pain and his horror.

"Dima, what's wrong with you?"

I wanted to answer. But the second "I" shouted out: "Kee-kha-eet-khi!"—an incomprehensible shout of pain and terror. The hairless face reeled back, and my hand rose and struck out. The face disappeared.

It was horrible. It was the second "I" that had hit, the one who was incarnated in the pain, but the blow was delivered by my hand, a heavy right uppercut to the jaw. I realized then how fortunate it was that the pain had prevented me from raising my elbow properly, and that the blow had not been delivered full force.

...The man was wheezing somewhere below, at my feet. The pain ebbed away like dark water. "His name is Romuald", one of us

remembered, but the second one shouted again: "Eet-khi!", and I understood "Alien".

The alien lay wheezing on the floor.

I bent down towards the white face. The pain immediately flared up like a still unextinguished fire, but I had begun to fight back. The other "I" wanted to kick the prostrate man in the temple, but I deflected the blow, and my leg struck the mesh. The striped cat let out a howl.

I called him by his name: "Tshcha-as". I drew myself up. The pain receded when I stood erect. In order to help Romuald, I would have had to bend over again, but I already knew that the pain was just waiting. The pain and that which came along with it—the second "I".

I could not bend down. Not for anything. Romuald was lying on the floor, the microphone in one hand, the wristbands in the other. He stopped wheezing, and I felt something like a sensation of happiness and then forgot immediately about him.

A new smell was wafting from behind me, from the direction of the entrance hall. I froze. I waited, without turning around.

...The doorbell rang out in the entrance hall. A short, insistent ring. And the smell grew stronger and more insistent. I shoved the armchair aside and crept towards the door. The black cat darted into the dark pit of the hallway.

I, the one from the present, extended my arm and turned the catch of the door lock to the right. Only the other I from the past,

the long-armed murderer, knew why I was doing that. A young woman stepped through the door. The same slender, curly-headed one with the haughty air. She looked at me. She looked out at me from her world with an inscrutable gaze and I drew myself up full height, took a deep breath, and wondered in astonishment how he was able to make out the smell of a woman, to isolate it from the mixed bouquet of powder, soap, and synthetic clothing. And from behind the thick door, amidst the stench of benzene and exhaust.

"Hello," the young woman said haughtily and reticently. "I need to see Romuald Grishin."

...The doorjamb started to crack beneath my fingers—the long-armed one had caught a glimpse of her neck and discerned the pointed nipples beneath her blouse. She looked at me again, expecting my answer, and suddenly she blinked her eyes once, then once again, took a step backwards and wrapped her coat around her more tightly. Her purse dangled on her arm.

The doorjamb bent and tore away from the frame. I stood there, every nerve and muscle strained to the limit, and heard the girl's thoughts: "I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid. I don't care, I'm not afraid!" she shouted to herself, and then: 'My God... What has he done with Romuald?"

...Something was tossing about. Scores of voices were babbling and I heard fleeting cries, like branches beneath the wind while

running through the forest. He darted forward to grab her and press her to his pain, but I stood, my fingers still clenching the door-jamb, while the girl adjusted her purse and asked, pronouncing each word separately:

"Where is Romuald Petrovich?"

From the study instantly resounded:

"He no longer lives here!"

The girl's face flushed and she turned around and went stomping down the stairs. I pulled the door shut and leaned against the cool wood. My jacket and shirt were sticking to me, my whole body was on fire, but I felt an unutterable relief. I had broken him after all. It was over. I had overpowered him...

"Did you close the door tightly?" Grishin asked weakly. I nodded without budging from the spot. "Is the door shut?" he repeated, beginning to get angry.

"It's shut..."

"Come on then, I want to do some tests."

He was made of iron, without a doubt. Despite his swollen cheekbone he fussed about beside the desk as if nothing had happened—set up the microscope, set out test-tubes and glass slides. I sat down in the armchair and stretched out my legs. There was a buzzing in my head, like after a knock-down. There was still a gnawing pain somewhere inside me. Ah, damnable pain!.. Fighting the instinct to get angry at Grishin and this entire affair, I apologized meekly:

"Forgive me, Romuald Petrovich."

"It's nothing. You and I are quits." He

touched his cheekbone, wiggled his jaw slightly, and glanced at me sideways.

I closed my eyes and collected my nerve.

"Do you have a mirror handy?"

He wasn't surprised. I heard him open the desk drawer.

It was hard for me to open my eyes. It was hard to turn the round mirror over and bring my reflection up into its frame. But the face I saw was mine. It was really my face—large and round, only a bit greenish and pale.

Without batting an eyelash Grishin put the mirror back into the drawer—face down—and slammed the drawer shut. With repugnance.

"Give me your hand. Your left one. Turn away!"

I did as he said. Grishin squeezed my middle finger and drew out blood. I didn't look. After a while I began to talk to him in order to distract myself from the nauseating smell of blood which seemed to fill the whole room.

"You don't want to ask any questions, Romuald Petrovich?"

"I don't need to. I'm a doctor. The past doesn't interest me." He released my hand and turned back towards the microscope.

I restrained myself with difficulty—the pain was mounting again. The smell of the blood had awakened it. Analyses, glass slides, accursed ideas...

"Then what does interest you?"

"The reaction of the psyche," Grishin replied indistinctly. "How it coincides with other reactions."

Once again I clenched my fingers; this time I gripped the arms of the chair.

"Open the window. Quick."

He muttered:

"Of course, of course..."

The window frames banged open. I sucked the air in greedily, purging my body of the pain. I breathed so hard that my ribs cracked.

"Calm down," Grishin said. "You'll be back to normal soon."

Everything was trembling and floating before my eyes. A thick jumble of sounds and smells wafted through the window. The smell of soap still lingered in the entrance hall. Some sort of mysterious spirit emanated from the obsidian knife which lay for some reason beside the microscope.

"Calm down, it'll all pass. Your blood's normal. It'll pass. Sleep for an hour or so and you'll be fine. Do you want to sleep?"

"No."

"Yes you do. You're falling asleep already. Go to sleep. Your eyes are falling shut. You're very sleepy."

"Let's talk," I persisted. "I really do feel like sleeping, but we'll talk for a while first..."

...I sat there with my eyes closed. The pain had subsided, but I was afraid that it could come back again. Time seemed to grow nebulous and suspended, like a protracted yawn. We talked unrestrainedly.

"Did you experience this also?" "Yes, there was this, too." "What now?" "Dima, now you'll forget about me." "I'm afraid I won't be able to." "You'll have to. That's my

request. A categorical request." "There is no such thing as a categorical request." "That's not important. You'll have to forget." "And if I don't follow your request?" "You will. You're a good fellow." "That's a strange assumption." "Not at all. I'll lay my cards out on the table. In carrying out this experiment I had one goal in mind—to test the pshychological reaction. You confirmed my fears with sufficient force. Memories are awakened, the worst memories, atavistic cruelty. Sometimes it seems to me that executioners and murderers have long known my secret. This invention is useless. Harmful. Consequently, mankind should not know about it. And you will forget it. Forever."

"That's not true," I objected. "Just a while ago you spoke about Lenin and Einstein. They're also in the past, and it would be possible to visit them, find out... You're contradicting yourself."

"Not in the least," he said. "Not at all. People like that were ahead of their time; they're here and will remain with us for a long time yet. And another thing. They existed just recently. Yesterday. An hour ago. This minute. My machine works in the present past—perhaps in a thousand years from now someone will succeed in journeying back to Einstein and talking with him. And who knows? To our fortunate descendant the great Einstein might turn out to be a cruèl old man and not very bright besides..."

"That's ridiculous," I said sleepily. "Utterly ridiculous!.."

"Everything changes," Grishin said. "Everything changes. Do you promise to keep silent?"

"If it's necessary..."

"It is. Now go and get some sleep. Follow me."

I rose, and in doing so, knocked a coffee cup from the table. I opened my eyelids with difficulty—they seemed to be glued shut. I looked at Vaska sitting sedately by the door, lazily washing his face with his paw. From the street below I heard the sound of a bus rumbling as it took off from the stop, then the grinding of the gears shifting, and the resonant roar of the engine growing fainter as the bus receded down the shadowy street.

Taking me by the arm, Grishin led me down the hall and laid me down on the couch in a small, cool bedroom. I mumbled drowsily, already half-asleep:

"Who was that girl? She had real courage... I've got to wake up in an hour's time, no later..."

"I'll wake you," Grishin said, and closed the door. I fell asleep.

...I sat up on the couch. It was totally dark and quiet. Through the open window came the smell of melting snow. I felt chilly—it must have turned colder with nightfall. I looked at my watch—an hour had passed, almost to the minute. I had gone to sleep at ten minutes after seven, and now it was fifteen minutes after eight. I mentally cursed Romuald: he had promised to wake me up and had forgotten, and I could have overslept. I hadn't called home to warn them, and

they were probably worried... And Natalya was already home. I had to call her. With that thought I opened the door to the study.

The lamp was burning on the edge of the desk, and my attention was immediately drawn to Grishin's hairy arm lying still on the arm of the chair, and the shattered pieces of the cup lying on the floor. As I drew closer, I realized that another cup was also broken and, in addition, that there were pills scattered everywhere. I saw all this like consecutive sequences in a film—the arm, the wristband on the arm, then the broken cups, the pills, the bottle. I was probably still drowsy, because I didn't immediately tie everything together and grasp what had happened. When I bent down and saw that Yegor was no longer underneath the desk, and that the handsome microscope was lying on the floor with its eye-piece dislodged, I rushed towards Grishin in thunder-stricken horror.

Beneath the green lampshade his face was deathly pale. His left hand bound by the wristband lay on the leather armrest, while his right hand gripped the handle of the obsidian knife. The blade, having sliced through the double wire of the wristband, was lodged sideways in the stuffing of the armrest, directly above the seat cushion. His hand was still warm. The knife rustled in the armchair when I tried to find a pulse in the right hand.

There was no pulse.

The second wristband dangled from the back of the chair and dropped to the floor as

I searched for a pulse on the heavy hand. Then I saw a note beneath the lamp.

"Dear Dima! I've had another attack, this is the end. I'm going to try to travel back. The wire will be severed when I lose consciousness. Call an ambulance. You helped a sick stranger in from the street. Remember: you promised to keep silent. Take off the wristband and hide the knife. Please do this for me. Goodbye. There's a phone in the next room."

...After calling the ambulance, I returned to the study and sat there for a few minutes in a total stupor, and got up only after hearing the quavering sound of the siren. Grimacing, I pulled off the wristband and breathed a sigh of relief when the knife slipped out of his other hand. I put the knife in my side pocket and wrapped the wires around the wristbands. They stretched over to the windowsill. There, behind the curtains sat a small box which resembled a cigarette case. And that was all. I picked up the box and made sure it wasn't connected to anything else—to a clock or to an accumulator. But it was just a hollow box with two wires and a wristband.

The siren wailed again, now very near. I bent out over the windowsill and saw the ambulance moving slowly down the dark street, its light flashing. A bus had pulled up at the stop, and the ambulance's searchlight slid across the walls of the buildings, and the passers-by stopped and watched. The siren fell silent. I could hear the bus driver announce: "Next stop, Gorky Street..." The search-

light illuminated the wall beneath the window and was extinguished. The ambulance turned about sharply and came to a halt by the sidewalk. Then I shoved the box into the pocket of my jacket and walked into the front room without another look around.

..."Cardiac arrest," the doctor said. She was a young girl, just slightly older than me.

Two young men in white medic uniforms followed her into the room without removing their caps. One stood holding a satchel, while the other assisted the doctor.

They fussed about for another few minutes—peered into his face, listened to his heart, until finally the doctor said: "It's no use. He's already cold," and the fellow with the satchel asked:

"Are you a relative?"

I replied:

"No. He... I helped ... brought him in from the street."

"Your name and address."

I told him.

"You're going to have to wait for the police."

"All right," I said.

But the doctor looked at me and said:

"Let him go. Go on home, you've been through a lot. Gleb Borisovich, call the police." She was still holding Grishin by the hand.

"Thank you," I said. "The phone is in the next room."

From the entrance hall I heard the voice of the fellow with the satchel:

"Alright, doctor. It seems to me I've seen this patient before in the City Psychiatric Hospital..."

I pulled my coat down from the hanger, descended the stairs and walked past the ambulance without a backwards glance. I thought I saw the curly-headed girl and the young girl with the jump rope standing across the street, but what could I do to help? And I continued on my way. I wended my way home, crossing squares and streets and turning mechanically where necessary, and the whole way the words: "Don't stir up memories of days gone by, days gone by" seemed to resound in my head. I was probably muttering them to myself—near a movie theatre two girls in identical bright red coats recoiled when I passed.

My mother opened the door. The color drained from her face and she asked: "Knock-out?" She lived in continual fear that I would be finished off in the ring. I replied:

"Everything's okay. I'm just a bit tired, that's all."

"Natalya called twice," she said. She stroked my arm and walked off to her room, leaving me in the hallway next to the telephone.

It was clear that if I didn't call Natalya immediately, Mother would be upset for real, and there would be a big to-do. I dialed Natalya's number, although I felt it would be best not to, since the words "Don't stir up memories..." were boring through my head.

"Hello..." Natalya said. "Hello! Speak up!"

"It's me, Natalya."

She fell silent. I could hear her breathing into the receiver. Then she said:

"Don't ever do that again. Do you hear? I thought... I thought..." She burst into tears, and I stood there with the receiver pressed to my ear, and didn't know what to say. But it gave me a good feeling that she was crying and that I was finally home.

I was home. And for a split second it felt as if nothing had happened, that I had dreamed it all as I sat on the street bench, and that everything was as before—the telephone, Natalya, and the yellow light of the small lamp in the hallway. "Everything as before", I muttered aloud to myself and that instant heard something thump faintly against the floor next to my left leg.

The obsidian knife had cut through my pocket and fallen, lodging into the floor. Seeing its coarse handle, for some reason I came to another realization. If everything that had happened and been spoken about was real and not hypnosis or the ravings of a brilliant paranoic, then I understood, why he was silent about his past, why he had told me nothing—how he had acquired the obsidian knife, why back then, in the study, after my return, I had noticed a vague, foul smell emanating from the knife. It was the same as if I had brought my hand-axe back from the past. But how had he brought the knife back? What had he been doing with that knife?

Natalya said: "Oh, what a cry-baby I am..." and as usual began chattering on about affairs

at the institute and her girl-friend Varya and I slowly lowered my hand and touched the wires and box in my bulging pocket. If this wasn't hypnosis, then what was it? Regardless, it was astonishing—why didn't the box plug in to anything? Now there was a puzzle—it didn't have to be plugged in anywhere...

I took a deep breath and flexed my muscles, stopping the light trembling in my back and shoulders. That's the way it felt in the dressing room before walking out onto the ring—tremors running through your shoulders and your thoughts slow and clear. Natalya chattered on gaily somewhere at the other end of town.

I hung up the receiver.

YURI YAROVOI

THE CRYSTAL HOUSE

Vinogradova actually did resign...

On her last day she went around to all the departments and laboratories where she had friends and acquaintances. And she stopped by to see us at SIB—the Scientific Information Bureau.

"So you're leaving, Olga Mikhailovna?"

"Yes, Volodya. I've been offered a job as department head."

That spring a new department had been set up in the civil engineering faculty of the polytechnical institute—the department of general city planning—and Olga Mikhailovna had been taken on after taking the competitive examinations. If you looked at it objectively, there was no candidate in the city better qualified for the position than Vinogradova with her

doctor's degree in architecture. For the last two years she had in fact been involved in general city planning, and two of her projects had received prestigious awards. A new term had even entered into architectural theory—"the open volumes of Vinogradova"... And only here, at the Scientific Research Institute of Civil Engineering Design where Olga Mikhailovna worked officially as chief engineer while in fact being the architectural head of the institute, did anyone know that her true love was interior design, and that she worked at city planning out of necessity... And even the term "the open volumes of Vinogradova" implied something quite different than the generally accepted interpretation.

"Aren't you going to miss us?"

Olga Mikhailovna thrust her cigarette into the corner of her mouth and looked at me with gloomy curiosity:

"What a cheeky fellow you are, Volodya. You know the reason."

She jumped up from the desk—sitting on the edge of desks was one of her favorite habits, and every now and then she would forget herself—I had even seen this happen in the office of our director, Mochyan—and suddenly appear one head higher than everyone seated, and majestic Vagram Vasilyevich would stop short in the middle of a sentence and contemplate Olga Mikhailovna on the edge of the "conference" table with silent reproach until someone subtly brought her "back to her senses"... Olga Mikhailovna jumped lightly

down from the edge of the desk, covered with stacks of fresh translations—it was hard to believe that she was already on the shady side of forty—ground her cigarette butt in the ashtray, and extended her small hand to me:

"Goodbye, Volodya."

Then she went around the room to all the information specialists with whom she had been acquainted and who had regularly furnished her with news and translations, and upon leaving she said in wonderment:

"How stuffy it is in here!"

And then she disappeared. It was as if she had simply melted in the doorway. A small woman with a rather unkempt hairdo and an eternal cigarette, in a thick sweater—she was forever cold, often even with slacks on... And a doctor of science no less! And charming even in a sweater and pair of slacks...

There was something highly unjust in this—at least that's the way many of our female colleagues at the institute felt. A woman with both brains and beauty... How can I convey more accurately the feelings whispered by the other women behind her back? That this was an unnatural, incompatible combination? In a word—diabolical. Of course, there were intelligent women among our female colleagues, but who among them would dare to show up at the institute in an ordinary, "everyday", as they themselves called it, kerchief, or in a shabby-looking fur hat with ear-flaps in the winter?

"Ah, yes... I stole it from Oleg," Olga

Mikhailovna would respond with a laugh if someone happened to mention it.

Oleg was her son, the apple of her eye, beside whom she herself looked like a schoolgirl.

Olga Mikhailovna left our institute and took with her the spirit of vitality... And then suddenly about two weeks later she showed up again. I spied her in the so-called exhibition hall on the fourth floor where new and generally interesting designs are displayed and where things are always in a turmoil. Vinogradova stood surrounded by her former colleagues, and it appeared they were discussing the Zarechny development project, Olga Mikhailovna's most recent work. I wanted to walk by without saying hello so as not to distract her, but she spied me herself, pushed her way through the circle, and shouted:

"Volodya!"

Not that much time had passed since I'd last seen her—all of two weeks—but there was already something strangely different about her, and I even asked worriedly if she'd been sick. But she brushed off my question:

"Don't be silly! It's a brand new faculty; I'm up to my neck in work..."

Perhaps that was it. But maybe it was because of her clothes? At our institute Olga Mikhailovna had always dressed in casual pants outfits, and now here she was all of a sudden in a tailored dark brown suit with a stand-up collar, white lace cuffs, and amber buttons....

"Find me a job on your faculty..."

What a clumsy request! I was not an architect, or a mechanic, or even an estimator... I was a mere technical information specialist. An engineer with a "broad range of interests" as they joked here. But to my surprise Olga Mikhailovna reacted to my clumsy request with total seriousness and nodded her head, which meant all right, I'll think about it, and then suddenly took my arm and led me along the corridor.

"Do you have a spare cigarette? I left mine over by the display case."

I gave her a cigarette and pulled out a lighter... I wondered what she wanted me for.

"So," Olga Mikhailovna said, exhaling a stream of smoke with an air of contentment. "I'm here. Do you have a spare half hour?"

"Of course! I've got two hours if need be."

"Then come with me."

She steered me resolutely in the direction of the stairwell:down, down ... when we reached the second flight of stairs I had already figured out where she was leading me. And herself. Not that she was trying to keep it a secret.

"Have you tried it? Any success?"

"Did you find him?" I answered her question with another and felt her grip my elbow more tightly and quicken her pace.

"Yes, he was at his parents."

But I detected something unpleasant in her "yes". Perhaps because it was followed by the word "was".

"He was?" I asked in surprise. "What, has he come back?"

She accelerated her pace even more; now we were almost running down the stairs. Where were we heading at this breakneck speed? What happened, doctor Vinogradova?

"He's dead, Volodya."

I stopped in bewilderment: dead. At that moment I could picture soft-spoken Lenya Kudrevatykh so plainly, always so self-conscious and preoccupied; before killing even a mosquito he would ask himself ten times: do I have a right to do this? And there had been such coldness, even hostility in Vinogradova's voice... Dead. It couldn't be. Anyone else, but not Lenya...

"Are you serious?"

"I couldn't be more serious!" Olga Mikhailovna said, taking a deep breath. "Let me have another cigarette."

We had come to a halt on the stairwell between the first and second floors. We stood by the window facing out onto the institute courtyard, crammed with girders, panels, box units, and partially assembled apartments with new and improved lay-outs. There was nowhere else to hurry to.

Lenya Kudrevatykh had appeared at the institute two years ago, a modest, inconspicuous technician from the laboratory of construction materials. The laboratory was situated in a separate building—from the stairwell where we stood there was a clear view of the door—broad enough for a freight truck to pass through—the arched frame above it, and the faded slogan right beneath the roof: "Create in the Spirit of the Times!" It wasn't

a bad slogan in my estimation, and rumour had it that the author was Vinogradova herself, but for some reason it brought a smile to most people's faces when they saw it for the first time... Strange!

To the right of the laboratory was a simulation area where designers worked out test models of apartments with new lay-outs and floor and ceiling elements for workshops and covered arenas. But more often than not the simulation area was empty and the employees used it as a volleyball court. It was there during lunch break one day that I met Lenya Kudrevatykh.

He was on our team and played the position directly behind me. Lenya was an abominable player, although he tried his utmost, and I was forced to scramble around frantically in order to cover for him. Nonetheless, this did not save us from being crushed, and in the end of the second set, covering Lenya from a well-delivered ball, I fell clumsily and scraped my hand.

"Come with me," Lenya said, a note of guilt and even fright in his voice. "We have a first aid kit at the laboratory."

I had been in the laboratory before, but always in passing. Their technical information seminars were always held in the boss's office, and now, "due to my accident", I was able to take a good look at all the technical equipment crammed into this laboratory. stoves, cranes, presses, more stoves... Right by the entrance stood a press that really caught one's eye—with its "head" beneath a glass

skylight above the roof. The skylight had evidently been made specially for this colossus.

"We press concrete structures on it," Kudrevatykh said, intercepting my glance. "It's a unique machine. It stands on its own cushion—five meters into the ground."

I washed my hand beneath the faucet, dabbed some iodine on it, and walked over to the giant press. It was a mighty machine, no doubt about it.

"Two thousand tons," Kudrevatykh said proudly, pressing on the "start" button and, a second or two later, on the lever. The punch began to slip down noiselessly, but at a distance of about a half meter from the matrix it suddenly plunged down and reduced the brick that had been lying there to a heap of red dust. I had not heard a sound as it struck.

"A drop hammer?" I asked in astonishment.

"Not entirely," Lenya answered with a smile. "A drop hammer crushes, but this presses. Only very swiftly. It's very convenient—instantaneous loads. You can create a pressure of up to one hundred thousand atmospheres. Would you like to see a demonstration?"

And, without waiting for a response, he pulled a bottle out from underneath the racks with the matrices. There was a cork sticking up from the mouth of the bottle. He pulled it almost entirely out and set the bottle beneath the punch.

"Try it." He was beaming with pleasure. "It's not hard, all you have to do is set yourself a precise task—what you want done. And it all works out."

Lenya pressed on the lever, and the punch plunged down...

"Here," he said, handing me the bottle, still in one piece, only now tightly corked. "Try it yourself, it's not hard."

I refused, waving my scraped hand. I had already heard about the trick with the cork. No one had succeeded in repeating it.

"And if you fill the bottle with water, you can create any internal pressure you want," Kudrevatykh explained with the same half-guilty, disconcerted smile.

"Any at all?" I asked in surprise. "But it'll shatter into smithereens!"

"Well, of course," he muttered, instantly somehow abashed. "But if you set yourself a task..."

I had heard about that as well. By some miracle this technician was able to divine the maximum pressure allowable during the testing of samples on this giant press. Let's assume that a ferro-concrete girder should crack beneath a load of two hundred tons. Without setting the pressure limiter, Kudrevatykh would apply pressure to the girder by hand, using the lever, and afterwards, when they deciphered the load-stress diagram, it would indicate a load of exactly two hundred tons.

"How are you able to do that?" I asked out of curiosity.

He thought for a moment, then grinned disconcertedly and repeated what he had said earlier:

"Anyone can do it. You just have to want

very badly to obtain the necessary result. And of course you have to know exactly what result you want. Imagine, for instance..." He shrugged his shoulders, expressing with his entire posture regret that he could not offer an intelligible answer to such a seemingly elementary question.

At that we parted, but every time we met after that he seemed so happy to see me that very soon we were on very familiar terms with one another, although in actual fact there wasn't much we had to talk about: a few words about the weather, a new film, or a new project on display in the "exhibition hall"... It was there, in the "exhibition hall", that he once truly astonished me.

Periodically, ordinarily once every three months, exhibitions were held in the hall under the slogan "Terra Fantasia". All the displays were unsigned, the authors could choose any theme, and the only condition necessary in order to get one's work entered into this fantasy exhibition, as our majestic Vagram Vasilyevich puts it, was total detachment from the problems and potentials of the present day. Irony of ironies, yet in the past several years almost half of the "fantasies", as it turns out when the envelopes containing the authors' names are unsealed, have been sent from Moscow, or Leningrad, or Kharkov... All this popularity, of course, is very flattering for Vagram Vasilyevich, although he is aware that it doesn't directly concern the institute as much as it does Vinogradova, who initiated this exhibi-

tion of fantasy at one time, had kept it going for five years now, if not longer, and herself regularly contributed the most "provocative" displays.

There was no denying that the furor that burst out each time around her displays was quite well-founded. And on this occasion Olga Mikhailovna had lived up to her reputation: on an enormous sheet of paper, about one meter by three, was a sketch of a building... Or was it a building? A fantastic oval hive, in which the rows of honeycombs seemed to disappear one by one into its depths. It created the impression that the entire building consisted of semi-transparent, precisely cut crystals, each of which existed in space independently of the rest... But on the whole this was a building consisting of a multitude of apartments! Could there really be such a thing in nature? Or, to be more precise, would it actually be possible to construct this "castle in the air"?..

Incidentally, the greatest furor raged not around the project itself—for it wasn't Olga Mikhailovna's fanciest creation—but around the card in the corner of the display, where the author was supposed to indicate the materials from which, in his opinion, his creation could be constructed, the approximate cost, and a whole series of other "estimated indices", as our designers would say. On the first day of the exhibition this entire card on the display with the Greek symbol "delta" was blank: the author, so to speak, admitted frankly that he had no idea what materials could be

used to construct his building-cum-hive. But two or three days later everyone noticed to their astonishment that the card had been filled in. In actual fact only the "material" column had been filled in, but with a note beside it reading "tested in nature". Among the multitude of figures characterizing some sort of mysterious brick were two which stuck out most conspicuously: weight—one unit (a mere toy compared with an ordinary brick and twice as light) and the cost—two-tenths of a kopeck per cubic meter. It was these two-tenths of a kopeck that had so amused everyone—cheaper than sand! And finally it was decided that it had all been a wonderful joke and on the bottom of the card beneath the "material characteristics" column one of the architects wrote: "October 5 should be considered as April 1."

But the following morning a genuine uproar arose. I don't know who first discovered the strange brick on the stand where the book of comments lay, but by the time I rushed over to the "exhibition hall", it was already jam-packed and there was a racket similar to that at a hockey match: "A three-ring circus!.. Mystification, ladies and gentlemen, illusion!.. Bravo for Madam Vinogradova!.. Can you imagine... Solid water!" With difficulty I managed to make my way through to the display with the hive-building. Olga Mikhailovna herself was standing there examining a glass block with a look of bewildered embarrassment on her face. Incidentally, the whole thing was that the block turned out

to be not of glass, but... What exactly was it made of? The next moment I found myself holding the block in my hands, and read on a card glued to one of its sides the same specifications listed on the display: "density—1, elastic modulus—3,0 x 10^4..." And below in quotation marks was: "solid water".

The block was snatched out of my hands before I had a chance to even take a good look at its color. Greenish-blue? In color it actually did resemble ice, except that it was warm... And its strength! A brick couldn't begin to compare!

About an hour later Olga Mikhailovna herself stopped by our bureau. She perched on the edge of my desk and announced:

"Well, Volodya, I think you owe me an explanation."

"About what, Olga Mikhailovna?"

"Don't play innocent, Volodya. The whole institute is demoralized, and Vagram Vasilyevich has personally removed the block of "solid water". Everyone's hope is on you: explain! The author, the composition, technology, and all the rest. Or is this really some sort of hocus-pocus?"

"How should I know, Olga Mikhailovna! You were holding it in your hands..."

"That's right. And I must confess I even licked it. And I'm convinced that it's no hocus-pocus. That's why I came to you. How much time will you need to find the culprit behind the sensation?"

I shrugged my shoulders: how should I know?

"Come on, now..." Olga Mikhailovna drawled out mockingly. "You know I've always thought well of you..."

And truly, to the amazement of many of my colleagues, she always did treat me well. Twice--on her birthday and New Year's—she had invited me to her home, something almost unheard of! The fact was, as I realized after my first visit, a good half of her guests showed up without any invitation at all. So those who came by personal invitation... But how could I help her? It was a mystery. "Solid water". And the thing was that it had to be someone from our institute. The block was discovered at exactly nine o'clock, and there are never any outsiders in the institute at that hour... That meant it was one of us.

What prompted me to remember Lenya Kudrevatykh? Maybe it was his tricks with the bottle inside which he had threatened to create any desired pressure, or maybe... But no, that was something else entirely. One morning I had run into him in the hallway, and he had shaken my hand and had been so happy to see me, but just then Olga Mikhailovna appeared, and I turned around to say hello, and when I remembered about Kudrevatykh... He was gazing at Olga Mikhailovna with such adoration, such reverence... All at once I felt like a little boy caught peeping through a key-hole and stepped quietly to the side, vexed at myself for blushing. But I don't think he even noticed: he just stood there like a frozen statue in the middle of the hall until Olga Mikhailovna disappeared from view.

But what was so surprising about that? How many men had lost their heads over Madam Vinogradova, as our female colleagues would say... And still: "You just have to want very badly to obtain the necessary result..."—weren't those the words he had used then? Yes, it seemed, the very same... Five minutes later I was at the laboratory of construction materials.

"Hello there, inventor! Well, you've really created a stir with your 'solid water'! Vagram Vasilyevich himself is all set to crown you with laurels!"

With an embarrassed smile Kudrevatykh hastily wiped his hands on a rag, then on his oil-stained overalls, and only then shook my hand. He looked sort of peaked—a pallid blue, I would say, like after a good drinking bout with one's school buddies. And his eyes were kind of sunken and drained...

"Have you been sick? They say the Hong Kong flu has been going around..."

"No," he replied. "It's just... I'm not even sure myself. Just ignore it."

"Ah... Tell me, then, how did you come up with this? What is it—ice?"

"No," Lenya said, shaking his head. "Ice is fragile; clusters form in it—those are groups of molecules with empty space between them. Now if you can catch the energy of water instantaneously, without allowing clusters to form..."

Evidently he could tell by the expression on my face that I knew absolutely nothing

about clusters and fell silent, wiping his hands distractedly on the rag...

"So then, would it be possible to build Vinogradova's hive with this 'solid water'?" I asked, again, more out of intuition, trying to fill in the awkward pause.

"Of course!" he exclaimed, and his instant transformation astonished me: his eyes lit up, the unpleasant bluish cast vanished from his face, and his voice, his voice! It was as if a different person was standing there! A real preacher, the thought flashed through my head, but the next second I had already forgotten about my irony, because Lenya was talking about things that were ... well ... quite interesting.

It seems he had toyed with the idea of creating "the open volumes of Vinogradova" while still at the civil engineering institute, where he had worked as a laboratory assistant during the day and had taken courses in the evening school. This is how he himself understood this term:

"Dwellings, and city structures in general are the price man pays for having become a homo sapiens... This idea was first put forth by Olga Mikhailovna, mind you! Man tore himself from the landscape, from nature; it was a step he was forced to take. Everything began with the cave. But as soon as he took this step and began building dwellings, Olga Mikhailovna claims, he shut himself out of nature, he ceased to be an element of nature. But then this would mean that ... he had ceased to evolve, understand? Man can not

live outside nature—that's the main idea of Olga Mikhailovna. He must be brought back, otherwise sooner or later he will begin to degenerate—in the biological sense, of course. It's a very interesting idea," Kudrevatykh continued feverishly. "She considers that the majority of modern illnesses are connected to the fact that man lives in a confined space: house, apartment, four walls, and the same thing at work, and at friends'... Understand? Everyone without exception suffers from claustrophobia, only in some it is manifested as fear of closed rooms, and in others as neurosis, psychosis—in a word, various nervous disorders, but this is already a predisposition to heart and vascular and various chronic diseases, and perhaps even to cancer. And you see, Olga Mikhailovna began searching for architectural solutions in houses and apartments which would liberate man from the oppressive environment created by walls and ceilings. I've read all her works, and both dissertations. The fact is, she opened up a path to a totally new science, and although they still haven't been able to come up with a name for it, it's only a matter of time. The crux of the matter is that governing laws must be found... And she's already found them. Olga Mikhailovna! You see, there exists a totally determined correlation between man's psychic state and the volume in which he is enclosed—its geometry, cubic capacity, transparency, and so on. Understand? Right now we're constructing buildings based on the criteria of external architectural appearance and

technological capabilities—the strength of concrete, the steel carcass... It was back in the thirties that the constructivist architects attempted to design a building as if from the inside out—based on expediency and comfort. And I realized how I could help Olga Mikhailovna: the thing is that in their geometry all buildings and dwellings must be similar to something natural, something already created by nature. Not only did nature create man, but ... it must have created a dwelling for him as well, that's the thought that struck me. Crystal, understand? The geometry of a crystal is such that it should create the impression of an open volume—I was convinced of that, although I didn't know exactly which crystal best met that requirement... Olga Mikhailovna! She found... You know, when I saw her new project with the apartment-crystals I pictured myself inside one of these apartments... It was the same thing I had been racking my brain over for years! And she solved it all so brilliantly, so simply... You know, when I first saw that building of crystals I almost cried. From joy... You can't imagine what a wonderful feeling it was..."

Even now he was in a similar state of elation... It was almost painful to look at him: his voice was trembling, breaking, there was a half-crazed light in his eyes... And over and over:

"Olga Mikhailovna, Olga Mikhailovna..."

"Wait a minute," I said finally. "Olga Mikhailovna sent me to find you. You should be telling all this to her, her!.."

He blushed, then turned pale and began to bustle about nervously, not knowing where to put his oil-stained rag...

"Yes, of course," he muttered. "I'll show her everything. After all, I did it all for her..."

"For her?"

"Well, yes." He had regained his self-composure, only again, didn't know what to do with his hands: one moment he would shove them in his jacket pocket, the next he would crack his knuckles... "Of itself crystal can not totally remove the oppression of claustrophobia. The crystal must be transparent or at least semi-transparent. It mustn't weigh upon man with its limitedness, the finiteness of its internal volume. "Then perhaps glass?" I thought to myself. But glass is too fragile and expensive. It was a long road, and I don't even remember how I arrived at the idea of 'solid water'. Most probably because it's inexpensive. Less expensive than anything else. And then I began trying to freeze water in durable cylinders... Want to see?"

"No, I have to call Olga Mikhailovna. Where's your telephone?"

She had evidently run all the way to the laboratory. At any rate, she arrived wide-eyed and out of breath, and stared for a long time at Kudrevatykh with a strange sort of smile. And then, as if not believing her own eyes, she shook her head and said in a rapid, joyful half-whisper:

"My God, it's Lenya... How could I have forgotten? And you've been with us for some time now? Hm, my prodigy... So you've

actually come up with something. Isn't it marvelous? What a persistent soul you are, Lenya..."

She walked over to benumbed Lenya and hugged him, stepped back and examined him with a happy smile, and then ran her fingers through his hair.

"Well, show me, my prodigy. So you've come up with a way to freeze water instantaneously? But won't it melt? Castles of water..."

"No," Lenya murmured, letting out a deep breath. "No. Don't worry, Olga Mikhailovna. I've tested everything. In 'solid water' all the molecules are aligned in the same direction. Here, look at this." All at once he began to bustle around by the press. He pulled out from somewhere a heavy solenoid and mounted it on the matrix. "There are six possible ways that each water molecule can freeze. But with this solenoid I create a powerful magnetic field which forces them to align themselves... They pack together, sort of like toy blocks in a box. At this point the important thing is to quickly change the orientation, take away their kinetic energy, before they have a chance to disalign themselves. To fix them... Watch this."

He pulled out a bucket of water from underneath the rack... Slivers of ice were floating on the top. He scooped out some of the thawed water into a smaller bucket, poured it into the matrix beneath the press, and turned on the solenoid. There was a loud click, the solenoid flew to the side, and from above

the punch came plunging down onto the water in the thick steel matrix...

I glanced at Olga Mikhailovna: she stood there transfixed, staring wide-eyed at the press, the water in the bucket, at Lenya... I had the feeling that she was seeing this all simultaneously—even the water through the thick sides of the matrix.

"Here," Lenya said with an embarrassed smile. "Take a look."

A transparent, faintly greenish block slid slowly out of the matrix—exactly the same as the one on the stand in the "exhibition hall". Olga Mikhailovna carefully picked up the block and distrustfully, shaking her head, turned its narrow edge around. It sparkled beneath the light like an evanescent rainbow.

"Miraculous," she muttered. "Simply miraculous... How in the world do you do it?"

Lenya was beaming. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that he was simply radiating happiness. It would be difficult to tell what was the greater miracle here: the block just extracted from beneath the press or its inventor...

"Now you try it," he said to Olga Mikhailovna. "It's very simple: first you have to press the handle to create enough pressure to extract the gases from the water, only it must be done quickly, no longer than two or three-tenths of a second, and then you take it immediately to one hundred thousand atmospheres."

"No, no!" Olga Mikhailovna protested. "I

could never do it. You can teach Volodya here," she said, nodding in my direction.

And he taught me: the main thing, as I understood from his explanations, was to literally picture in your mind, to the point of tangibility, that the water in the matrix has become glassy. You had to picture this at the very moment you were pressing on the handle. But it was only after the third or fourth attempt that I succeeded. And when Lenya announced that this time it had worked, I felt so exhausted and worn out from my efforts to ascertain the required pressure on the lever that I involuntarily plopped down on a crate beside the press—my legs had given in.

"Talk about work!.."

And just at that moment Vagram Vasilyevich walked into the laboratory. Cordial and majestic as usual, he literally snatched the block I had just finished pressing from Olga Mikhailovna's hands.

"My oh my, " he exclaimed, clucking his tongue. "My dear Olga Mikhailovna! Such a discovery, such an invention... Why this is Nobel prize material! And you've been keeping it all to yourself... My, my!.."

"It's not my invention at all," Olga Mikhailovna laughed. "He's the one who created this miracle!" She said, pointing to Lenya, who at this point was totally overwhelmed.

"Is that right?" Majestic Vagram Vasilyevich stared in astonishment at the technician whom he was obviously seeing for the first time in his life. "Why that's

wonderful! Just brilliant!"

Quite a crowd had already gathered around the press: the head of the laboratory, engineers, laboratory assistants...

"Well then," Mochyan pronounced, surveying those gathered with a piercing gaze. "A new invention? Wonderful, excellent, as I see it..."

Mochyan adored new inventions. There was one fixed procedure in the institute that had been established once and for all: everything that left the institute—projects, articles, interviews, and, of course, applications to the Committee on Inventions and Patents,—everything left only with the official stamp of the director. The sole exception existed for Vinogradova. However, Olga Mikhailovna had no desire to make use of this exception and all her articles, as well as those of her colleagues, passed through Vagram Vasilyevich's office. "Why do you do this to me?" Vagram Vasilyevich would exclaim indignantly. "You carry out totally independent work, my dear Olga Mikhailovna. I have my hands full as it is with the rest of my staff. I have quite enough co-authors..."

The "author of the project" himself walked over to the press. Only this time he turned out the blocks silently, without explanations, and only the fine droplets of perspiration covering his entire face gave way the fact that he too was labouring under tremendous stress. "Just like a wet rag," the thought flashed suddenly through my head. "That's why he looks so exhausted."

"Well now..." Vagram Vasilyevich muttered, staring awe-stricken at the growing pile of crystal blocks at his feet. "But have you tested it to see if it melts?"

"It won't melt," Lenya replied.

"Then let's see what an experiment shows. The almighty experiment!" Mochyan thundered, suddenly recovering his grasp of the situation. "Bring me a thermostat! As for the program, I myself... Science is collective work, is it not?"

They stacked up three blocks.

"The number three, the Slavs always said," Vagram Vasilyevich pronounced, "it's already an average-statistical quantity. So let's have three."

They attached a thermocouple to each block, hooked up thermometers—the laboratory assistants knew their business—and turned up the thermostat...

"Keep the door open," Mochyan ordered. "An experiment must be carried out in full view. For all to see."

But there was nothing to see. When the temperature rose above 100 degrees centigrade, a light mist appeared above the blocks which instantly dispersed, while the blocks themselves began to shrink. The "solid water" evaporated without melting.

"Hm-m..." Vagram Vasilyevich drawled out thoughtfully. "This is going to require some discussion. It looks as though we've got something serious here." He surveyed everyone present with a heavy, riveting gaze and left,

beckoning for the head of the laboratory to follow.

We knew what Mochyan's riveting gaze meant: everyone back to their desks immediately—it was exactly the way he dispersed the architectural public from the "exhibition hall". But this time Vagram Vasilyevich's gaze, as we soon learned when the head of the laboratory returned, panting and out of breath, meant something altogether different.

"Just a minute, stay where you are!" he shouted. "Your name, please? And yours? And yours?"

He wrote all the names down in a notepad and explained in an apologetic tone of voice, addressing himself for the most part to Olga Mikhailovna:

"The director has ordered that this invention be kept from public scrutiny until such time as a patent be obtained. The list with your names will be turned over for verification... Do you understand what this means?"

"Oh God!" Olga Mikhailovna sighed. "Vagram Vasilyevich is looking for a co-author..."

Her high spirits of half an hour ago had been totally crushed. And Lenya sat on the crate beside the press looking dejected and dead-tired.

"Come on, guys," Olga Mikhailovna said, touching flagging Lenya lightly on the shoulder. "Let's go outside and have a smoke."

Lenya roused himself, and a smile spread over his face.

"There's something I want to show you, Olga Mikhailovna."

And show her he did.

There was a metal garage behind the laboratory. God only knows who it belonged to, because it evidently had been used for ages as a storehouse for all kinds of junk. But when Lenya opened up this garage, Olga Mikhailovna and I both gasped simultaneously with one "ah!": the entire enormous garage was filled from floor to ceiling with blocks of "solid water".

"When did you manage to do all this, my prodigy?" Olga Mikhailovna exclaimed, wide-eyed once again and forgetting all about both Mochyan and the unpleasant name-taking by the press. "We could build a whole new section out of this miracle! My God, what a marvel..."

But all at once Vagram Vasilyevich rose up against the idea of the new section: until the material had been patented, no one must see it, touch it, or, God forbid, remove it from the confines of the institute. Period. No arguments. Evidently Olga Mikhailovna and Mochyan had a "big" talk. Evidently, Olga Mikhailovna resorted to extreme measures, for otherwise Mochyan would never have backed down so quickly. But literally on the second day after the "summit meeting", as Olga Mikhailovna ironically referred to it, on the square behind the laboratory of construction materials and next to the old garage, hefty carpenters showed up and in a trice had put up a plank fence with a booth and guard.

It goes without saying that the guard was "put up" by Vagram Vasilyevich himself, after granting access to the square to only those individuals who had been involuntary witnesses to the stamping of the "solid water" and had wound up on the "control list". And so it turned out that I was among eight other laboratory assistants, technicians and engineers from the laboratory of construction materials who were freed from their immediate responsibilities in order to build the section crystal. I helped build it under the supervision of Olga Mikhailovna herself.

Not everything went smoothly; we spent a frustratingly long time experimenting with various glues—just how were these blocks to be joined together?—but we finally did succeed in building the new section. In appearance it was a fantastical aquarium, exactly like one of the glass structures which appear from time to time in parks and city avenues, its transparent walls inviting one inside to drink a cup of coffee or splurge on a shish-kebab. But there was only one difference: our aquarium building was not transparent, while from the inside everything was visible!

Once I found Olga Mikhailovna in the "crystal house" somewhat distraught. She was sitting in the middle of the room (if that fantastical interior with slanted walls could actually be called a room), and Lenya was sitting beside her on the floor. At the moment I didn't pay any attention to him—it was Olga Mikhailovna who took me by surprise, and

only later, back at my desk, did it hit me that... Something had taken place between them. It's difficult to immediately make sense out of the jumble of thoughts that come suddenly to your head, half-forgotten episodes, conversations, even whispers... Twice I ran into them on the street, walking side by side, and to my surprise Lenya was carrying her purse... I said hello, but they just walked by as if they hadn't even seen me. And the second time approximately the same thing happened. And all sorts of rumours and talk spread through the corridors of the institute... It was revolting to hear all of it. It was obvious that she enjoyed Lenya's company, and what was wrong with that? There has to be at least someone in the world with whom a person can unwind and open up his heart. And there, in the "crystal house", as the workers in the laboratory of construction materials christened it, one could often find them together. Most of the time they would sit there silently, or Lenya would talk about something in a hushed voice, to her alone, while she... She always had the appearance that she was dozing. She would sit reclining against the back of a chair or bench, and there was such a vacant, sad expression on her face: her eyes half-shut, her hands folded across her chest, a faint smile flickering across her lips... In a word, totally relaxed. But this time... Or maybe I just imagined it? All kinds of rumours were circulating through the corridors... Sooner or later vile thoughts start to creep into your head, regardless.

"Volodya?" She raised her head and stared at me in surprise, as if I had just landed from the Moon. "Ah, Volodya... Come on in..." She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her sweater pocket and proffered it to me. She took one herself, rolled it in her fingers, poked it in the corner of her mouth, and then burst into laughter:

"Volodya, we can't smoke here. Put your cigarette away."

"Why not?" I asked, glancing back over my shoulder.

"You'll spoil the view," she said with a smile, taking in the room with a wave of her hand.

I looked back around more attentively and it finally dawned on me: the walls were not exactly transparent, but ... translucent. Pale blue. The fact was, it was impossible to determine their color at the first glance—it seemed to fluctuate.

"That's right," Olga Mikhailovna said, "it's a clear day, and so they're pale blue, reflecting the color of the sky." And she explained all this with a vacant look in her eyes, as if she were obviously somewhere else miles away.

I tried to shift my position just a bit... Exactly at the same spot where... But where was he? Hadn't I just looked around? Lenya had vanished, quietly, like a ghost. Hm... But what had brought me to this spot? Ah, yes! I moved just another inch or so and ... the walls, or more precisely the facet facing up towards the heaven, disappeared! Simply

vanished into thin air. This was so startling that I involuntarily burst into laughter. It was a stifled, extraordinarily absurd-sounding laugh.

"What is it?" Olga Mikhailovna asked. Realizing at once what had happened, she rose and offered me her chair. "Sit down, Volodya."

I sat down and... Why had I never noticed it before? I had been in this section of the crystal dozens of times, but not once... All the walls and the ceiling, also composed of blocks of "solid water", had vanished, and I had the sensation that I was standing somewhere on a plateau, and surrounding me on all sides was boundless expanse. So this, then, was what the "open volume of Vinogradova" meant...

"Yes, Volodya," Olga Mikhailovna confirmed. "In our cities we have learned how to create these volumes—squares, building ensembles, but the interiors..."

She lit up a cigarette anyway. And a strange thing happened! The boundless expanses instantly grew cloudy, and the walls, which had up until then appeared to be invisible, now began to take form, although still very vaguely, as if a light fog had begun to settle around us.

"You see, Volodya, I keep trying to capture that same perspective. Only it turns out that it's very difficult--to keep the apartment open. Just a minute ago you and I were out in the open, up high in the mountains, right? And all it took was for an old crow to blow

out some smoke, and poof, the perspective was lost. But what if you were to fill the apartment with furniture? And hang up curtains? Is it possible to find the right proportions and the right thickness of walls so that when a person opens up the curtains, he'll always be right beneath the sky? That's the real problem..."

Olga Mikhailovna picked up a pencil and bent back down over the display, squatting on her haunches. I couldn't grasp at first what she was drawing: she would outline a portion of the paper with a broken line and then ink it in. Some portions were pale, others slightly darker, yet others darker still... Then suddenly, stepping back, I realized that the portions all flowed together to form a clear drawing... A house? Yet another fantastical "hive", a splicing of octahedrals-crystals...

But then everything suddenly went topsy-turvy. It all began with majestic Vagram Vasilyevich, who decided to speed up the patenting. One day he summoned Lenya into his office. Leonid Grigoryevich, as Vagram Vasilyevich called him without a trace of a smile. As I learned later, there was an expert there on inventions who, it seems, had drawn up all the papers, and these Vagram Vasilyevich placed unceremoniously before stricken Lenya.

"Read these and sign," Mochyan said cordially. "Right here, beside this gentleman," he added, pointing to the expert. "Discoveries like this are made once in a hundred years, am I not correct?"

Lenya dutifully read all the papers, Vagram Vasilyevich handed him his pen to sign with, Lenya found the first line for the signature and, to Mochyan's great surprise, proceeded to cross out his name. Actually, as it turns out, Vagram Vasilyevich thought that he had crossed out an altogether different name...

"How is that?" he exclaimed indignantly, staring pointedly at Lenya. "Do you mean to say that in the presence of this expert from the administration you deny my participation in the working out of the methodology, in the experiments, even in the technology? What do you mean by this?" In pained bewilderment he now fixed his gaze upon the "expert from the administration".

"It's not your name that I crossed out, Vagram Vasilyevich, but mine," Lenya said, throwing the director into even greater bewilderment. Poor Vagram Vasilyevich! He was about to receive yet another blow... "It's Olga Mikhailovna's idea," Lenya announced. "I only ... only carried it out."

"What!" Mochyan exclaimed, thunderstricken. "Now that's the last straw... Madam Vinogradova! But that's impossible! Nonsense, young man. Nonsense!"

Well of course. It was one thing when your co-author was a young, unknown laboratory technician—an executor and nothing more, and quite another thing when it was a highly renowned architect, the author of independent inventions, without any co-authors... Nonsense, of course, how could anyone

fail to see it? Yet Vagram Vasilyevich's efforts to change the technician's mind were unavailing.

And so dark days set in for us. Not so much for us, of course, but for Olga Mikhailovna and Lenya. The guard was removed from the booth, the door to the booth was sealed up, and in order that no amateur photographers would take it into their heads to snap a shot of the "crystal house" from the roof of the laboratory of construction materials or the fence, at the director's order "pending finalization of the patenting of the new material", the "crystal house" was covered with an old tarpaulin saturated with oil, benzene, and God only knows what else. It was with this same tarpaulin, as the materials' laboratory assistants confirmed, that the fitters once covered the giant press when the roof above it had been dismantled.

And then, suddenly... It's unpleasant even to recall. Suddenly one day lanky Oleg showed up at the institute. He had paid other visits to the institute before that—on family business, so to speak. And it soon became clear that this time too he had come strictly on "family business".

"Hey, old man!" he greeted me joyfully from the doorway. "It's been ages!"

Just picture this great, hulking fellow full of charm and irrepressible optimism! And what a fabulous smile!.. All the girls in my office instantly "lost their heads".

Thumping me on the shoulder and simply

beaming with happiness at having finally found a bosom friend, Oleg began in a "confidential whisper" that carried across the entire room:

"Listen, old man, I understand there's a certain loony here who they say has invented 'solid water'. Introduce me to him, won't you—mother's been talking my head off about him... Eh? Be a pal."

I introduced him. He would have introduced himself anyway—even without my mediation. And so I decided it would be better for me to go along, still feeling something bad in the air.

We found Lenya at the press. He was preparing a concrete slab for demolition. His motions were somehow sluggish, like those of an old man. It was a sorrowful sight.

"This little shrimp?" Oleg exclaimed in surprise. After examining him more closely he announced confidently: "That's him. Introduce me, old man."

As it turned out, he introduced himself: "Oleg Vinogradov." And, with a broad, expansive smile, he added: "Son of Professor Vinogradova by the grace of God."

But Lenya had evidently already guessed this. He stood there looking abashed; again he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands...

"Listen, old man," Oleg bent towards him confidentially, "have you lost your mind or something? Well, Mother, I can understand, the autumn of her years and all that... But you couldn't be more than twenty, twenty-three at

the most? Don't you think it's just a bit awkward, old man? People are laughing. A doctor of architecture, within an ace of being an academician, and... All right, I know it's more than just titles and positions. But just try to look at it in human terms: you and me. Ha! Papa... Well? Have I made myself plain enough? It's just awkward. Here I am walking down the avenue, arm in arm with a certain young lady... She puts her palm up to her mouth and bursts out laughing, old man. 'Who's that with your mother? Is that him? Tee-hee...' She was referring to you, old man. Clear? It's awkward, can't you see that yourself? And then there's my father, he's still around, you see. So they had their squabbles and split up... Those things happen. I myself could already be one... A papa, that is. Get it? And the thing is, my papa comes around to the house regularly. Just picture this scene: you, together with Mother ... well, it's understandable, of course, we're all only human. But then here Papa comes barging in... With a bouquet of flowers and box of chocolates. Regularly, by the way. Get the picture? Maybe all is still not lost, maybe he's still hoping, see? Come on, old man, wake up!.."

"Yes, yes," Lenya said, appearing to have actually woken up. "You're right, this whole thing is awkward. You're right. Thanks for the advice. I ... I understand everything. Forgive me."

"Well, then!" Oleg exclaimed happily. "I knew you'd see it. Everyone makes mistakes

now and then. We're only human. Sorry if I came down too hard on you, old man."

As a sign of good will towards us he pounded first Lenya, then me, on the shoulder. Lenya shrunk beneath his mighty palm. He stood staring down at the floor, so small and frail.

"We'll be pals!" Oleg called out from the doorway.

That Lenya had disappeared—had stopped showing up at the institute, I learned from Olga Mikhailovna. She stormed angrily into the office one day, without a word of greeting, leafed through some sort of bulletin for appearance's sake, and then said:

"Could you see me out, please?"

We walked outside onto the avenue—she didn't want to talk to me inside the institute. She was silent for a long time and then blurted out suddenly:

"Who gave you the right to interfere in my personal life?"

Only with enormous difficulty did I manage to convince her that my role in this "interference" had been infinitesimal—I had merely been present at the time, and nothing more.

"You're lying, Volodya. He could never have acted so basely," she snapped out in parting. "He"—was her Oleg. "He could never have acted that way. I don't believe you."

But later, it seems, she came to believe it.

And then she left the institute altogether.

Soon after that ill-fated fire for which, as the rumour goes, our majestic Vagram Vasilyevich was fined to the tune of a considerable round sum. Although based on the report drawn up by the fire chief, the only charge against Vagram Vasilyevich was that he had obstructed "passage to the site of the blaze" with his two-meter-high fence which shielded the "crystal house" from the world at large. And the site of the blaze, as the "fire report" confirmed, was located in the old garage where for years all sorts of rubbish—old rags, jars with solvents and the like—had been dumped, and which Lenya, in removing the blocks of "solid water" from the garage, had evidently piled up in one corner. And so when all this burst into flames, including the oil-soaked tarpaulin over the "crystal house" ... it went up in a flash. The only thing left of the crystal structure was its steel carcass. Even now it juts up behind the laboratory of construction materials—from here, from the stair landing between the first and second floors where Olga Mikhailovna and I are standing, only its corner is visible.

"So you haven't tried it, Volodya?"

"No. Besides, who would give me permission to use the press?"

Olga Mikhailovna let out a deep sigh, tossed away her cigarette, and said:

"Too bad. And I..."

She broke off in mid-sentence.

"Me too," I said, guessing what she had wanted to say. "I walk along the street, and when I look up I see nothing but brick and

stone, no room to breathe. We are cave men, aren't we, Olga Mikhailovna? Everyone scurrying to burrow themselves away inside their apartment-lairs. We build our dwellings so that they look down at us, crawling around on the ground." All at once I burst out: "You know, Olga Mikhailovna, it's all because we're tied to the earth. For now we don't even need anything else—we live on one plane. But one day people will begin to live in three-dimensional space. I don't know exactly how it will come about—maybe they'll learn to fly using some kind of motors or wings, or maybe they'll overcome the force of gravitation altogether... And then everything will change: the appearance of buildings, cities... Understand? Buildings will turn their faces to the sky, open up... Right?"

Olga Mikhailovna looked at me with interest:

"Open up?"

"That's right. Isn't that what you had in mind when you introduced the term 'open volumes'? The time will come when we will inevitably turn away from brick and concrete boxes. But what will take their place? Cup-buildings, flower-buildings, crystal-buildings... And they'll all be facing towards the sky, the sun! And then the need will arise for a totally new material—can you imagine a flower-building made of bricks? And when everyone comes to realize this... They'll learn how to make crystal blocks. It's inevitable."

Olga Mikhailovna shook her head pensively:

"Yes... He once said to me: 'Man is still

very weak, he needs a shell...' " Then suddenly, as if the answer had just dawned on her, she grabbed me by the sleeve: "As long as you're envisioning flower-buildings... There 's no reason for you to emulate others' ideas! Let's go, Volodya. Since you know what has to be done—do it! Start drawing, use your imagination..." She dragged me by the sleeve along the corridor as if I were a mischievous schoolboy. "As long as you're dreaming about flower-houses, then start drawing! I can use another visionary... I'll make you work, make you..."

And suddenly she stopped, out of breath, turned sharply towards me and said, looking into my eyes:

"I knew all along that there was something in you ... from him."

TIMUR SVIRIDOV

OPERATION LIFEBOAT

...The earth had already warmed up although it was not yet noon. The prickly blades of grass strove towards the rays of the sun. Everything around seemed blindingly beautiful and exuberantly ecstatic. Thousands of appealing aromas floated in the air, and none of them gave cause for alarm.

I turned over and relaxed, lying directly on the grass.

My dog made room for himself right next to me. He was sniffing very rapidly and had poked his soft red tongue out between yellowish canine teeth. He wagged his tail at me, and I nodded back in approval, feeling a strange sort of kinship with him.

I kept turning over in my mind the events which had occurred so long ago when I was still a journalist...

* * *

The automobile slowed down jerkily, raising a whole cloud of light, dry dust in its wake. It was an old car, so the process of braking called forth an entire orchestra of squeals, vibrations, and clanks. After that rusty music had died down and the dust been carried away by the wind, the driver turned to me and spat out hoarsely:

"This is it, mister. This is as far as I'm going into this godforsaken place!"

"Thank you, Azalberto!" I replied, shaking his strong, steady hand. As I opened the car door, I said, "I don't know how I would have gotten along without you. You've been a great help." With that, I jumped down into the warm dust.

Before me stretched out a broad hollow cut through by a multitude of low sierras. I could see everything for kilometers around, because there was nothing to block the view. I could see greenery ahead, and it looked odd in the middle of the bare plains. Next to it, rotting gates were hung from solitary gateposts. And nowhere was there any sign of a fence or wall.

Azalberto revved the motor of his car and pulled off.

"Farewell!" he shouted, waving his hand through the open window.

Thank goodness the wind wasn't blowing the dust into my face. I waved back in response with my free hand. The other hand was occupied with a large gym bag. The khaki-colored Volkswagen with chipped paint raced

away, carrying the swarthy lad farther and farther from the "godforsaken place" where he had left me.

The long silence was finally broken by the sound of the rusty old gate creaking on its hinges in the wind. It opened at such an angle that I could see the faded, chipped sign:

OPERATION LIFEBOAT
National Ecological Preserve
and Scientific Research Center

I walked through the gate and headed for the grove in the distance. It was quite a hike, so to kill time, I pondered what I could throw out of my gym bag to lighten the load. There was a lot of stuff I wouldn't really miss, and the farther I walked, the longer the list got.

The road wound its way into the bushes and was lost from sight. In the sierra, it had been barely discernible, because it was rarely used. But here, driving was not at all an accepted mode of transportation. Only a footpath had been cut through the undergrowth.

Gradually, I was surrounded on all sides by succulents: the thorny tentacles of agave and the spines that covered the flat faded leaves of prickly pear grabbed at me. This flora was fully in keeping with the local conditions, which were arid, saline soils with a grave shortage of water.

"How peculiar," I reflected. "Why should anyone have thought of making an ecological preserve in a place like this?"

However, I had not gone more than a kilometer when the picture began to change drastically. First moisture-loving monkey-puzzle trees and giant bamboo began to appear, and soon after, fruit-bearing trees and plants of all kinds could be seen. Avocados with lush flower-covered panicles waving overhead gladdened the eye. This was a real achievement—only a true master could grow such plants in a place with conditions like those prevailing in the preserve.

But the deeper I went into that strange forest, the more my amazement grew. The customary agaves had been replaced by flowering magnolias and small palmettos with broad, fan-shaped leaves. The air was filled with the fragrant aroma of anise. It was remarkable that plants from such drastically differing climatic zones were growing here all in one spot!

My trained eye told me at once that they were completely satisfied with the local conditions. Even those strains which had been traditionally pampered with much more fertile soils were content. I wondered how the staff managed to achieve such results.

"...The brilliant successes of the Lifeboat staff are quite amazing. One wants to exclaim in disbelief: 'That can't possibly be!' when one sees before one's very eyes mighty cedars and grapevines standing next to modest ginkgos, or pungent eucalyptuses, graceful Karelian birches and imposing magnolias all growing tranquilly side by side. Perhaps the day will finally come when we can walk out

into our gardens to admire simultaneously date palms and buckthorns flowering!.." The words that rang out in my mind were inevitably filled with journalistic cliches—the bane of my profession.

I switched my heavy bag to the other hand and trudged on. To my surprise, I noticed that the path was perfectly straight with no deviations; a real forest path would certainly have meandered much more. Additionally, this particular one was overgrown with short, tough grass that creaked resiliently as it gave way beneath the soles of my shoes.

To the right appeared another patch of prickly pear—the large variety that gave Australian farmers such a devil of a time when it took over in the enormous pastures common there. But here, the cacti grew tamely in a solitary little patch, though each plant was much taller than a man. Covered with large, sharp reverse-pointed spines, those common opuntia looked like wildly alien creatures in the midst of that lush forest. However, to tell the truth, all that I saw began to remind me more and more of a botanical garden than a real forest.

"...Professor Quastmu has managed to create something more than a tropical hothouse in the midst of the desert. It suffices to take one step out of this garden, and one passes abruptly from a land of beauty and harmony into something resembling a bare lunar landscape. It is difficult to imagine the enormous possibilities for agriculture opened up by the work of Kenneth Quastmu in terms of the uti-

lization of barren soils alone..." Another invasion of snatches of those sterile phrases and stereotypes which I would probably never be able to free myself of for the rest of my life.

"I wonder why in the world Azalberto was so reticent to come here..." I thought to myself. "There should be guided tours of a place like this—people should have to pay through the nose to come here!"

It had been quite a task to convince that local fellow, who seemed to be quite normal, to bring me anywhere near the Operation Lifeboat Institute. And he had categorically refused to drive onto the actual territory of the preserve. From the expression on his face, I realized the reason for this reticence was far more than simple disdain. It was rather painstakingly concealed fright. Could it really be that all this unfamiliar flora, these monkey-puzzle trees, eucalyptuses and so forth...

The thoughts flowing smoothly through my mind broke off abruptly and went no further.

I continued walking as if nothing had happened, but I sensed a piercing gaze directed at the back of my head. Never before had I been at all aware of such things, but all at once, I was as internally tense as a taut bowstring. I lost the last traces of self-control, stopped dead in my tracks, and turned sharply around.

I could make out two beady eyes concealed in the shadow of the large pancake-shaped

leaves of the closest prickly pear: I was being watched!

"Hey!" I shouted nervously. "Who's there?"

The eyes didn't blink—they didn't even twitch.

"...The criminal coldbloodedly aimed the gun at his defenseless victim; he gently crooked his finger about the trigger..."

"Who's that hiding there?" I asked loudly in a vain attempt to raise my spirits. Unfortunately, I achieved exactly the opposite. My voice sounded timid and lonely in the strange forest. So I made a movement as if I were about to walk closer to the prickly pears, and in a flash, a creature I vaguely recognized as a monkey dashed by.

A monkey!?

My bag thudded to the ground of its own accord: it simply slipped through my fingers. That was impossible! I couldn't believe my own eyes this time, though I was quite accustomed to relying on them. I was even a bit vain when it came to their sharpness and quickness, qualities so necessary to the reporter's profession.

The monkey was not very large—something on the order of a macaque, but it was impossible to tell for sure. It raced rapidly up the trunk of the nearest oak and concealed itself in the lush verdure of the crown. My mouth had fallen open in amazement: I was thunderstruck.

I could somehow accept the fact that here, given the conditions of the local continental climate and arid soil, by using some unheard-of

method of his own invention, Quastmu had managed to get an amazing variety of flora to adapt and survive. But monkeys—that was a bit too much for me! Nothing and no one could convince me that these natives of Northern Africa could exist normally in such a place as this, except in captivity.

However, I was not destined to ponder this intriguing matter for long. My ruminations on the appropriateness of monkeys at the preserve were interrupted by barking which wafted my way from the distance. In this cacophany of yelps, howls, and barks, I could make out a dozen or so distinct cries.

I was not thrilled in the least by the prospect of meeting up with a pack of wild dogs, so I hurried on in hopes of making it to the research center. In my rush, I didn't pause to contemplate the species of plants I was passing, although there were some truly remarkable specimens.

The barking grew louder. Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine the direction from which it was coming, but in any case it was getting closer and closer.

The pack of dogs finally became visible among the trees after I could already see a long low building beckoning to me. I ran for all I was worth, tightly clutching my ten-ton gym bag. Still, the dogs managed to catch up with me easily. Since I was well aware that the canine tribe had a malevolent custom of attacking anything that was running, I froze in my tracks. I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs.

"...The death of the young journalist in Professor Kenneth Quastmu's unusual ecological garden at the Botanical Research Center was undoubtedly the result of an impermissible laxness on the part of the staff, which was firmly convinced that there could be no strangers on the territory of the ecogarden..." Again, snatches of journalese flashed through my head.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I exclaimed mentally, getting a hold on my crazed emotions. "I have no intention of dying just yet! After all, these are only dogs, and as far as I know, dogs never go completely wild to the end of their days, even if they wind up living in a wolf pack. That means they won't attack a human being unless they've been specially trained to do so!"

The motley pack of mutts surrounded me, and I was struck at once by the noble appearance of a laconic muscular black schnauzer and a gloomy, barrel-chested Alsatian. The mutts continued to race around me at a respectful distance of about four meters, glancing fearfully at the stick which had unexpectedly appeared in my hand. But the schnauzer and Alsatian remained silent, as before, and walked up to me with great concentration. They nudged me dumbly forward, in the direction of the low building.

"Hey, you, people!" I wanted to shout in despair. "Where are you when I need you? Don't let a young journalist come to an untimely end before he writes his most sensational article!"

I made my way to the center's research building under the supervisory nudges in the back of the two enormous gloomy watchdogs. The pack quieted down a bit as the other dogs cast searching, eager glances at their leaders.

I mentally cursed my boss with all my heart for giving me this particular assignment. Our boss was tall and gray-haired. This almost elderly man's nickname among the staff was Bunny Rabbit, for his eyes were eternally red, and his upper lip always twitched when he was lost in thought.

"What does the name Kenneth Quastmu mean to you?" he had asked. "Professor Kenneth Quastmu..."

"What is his field?" I asked inquisitively.

"That's what you have to find out," said the Bunny Rabbit, taking off his thick horn-rimmed glasses and staring at me myopically. "Listen to this, Bernie. That venerable professor left a major research institute in Florida for some nature preserve way out in the boondocks. About ten years ago, we received some material about his achievements—he had managed to get yew saplings to acclimatize themselves to saline soils. The very idea sounded so insane, no one took him seriously. And there you have it," he concluded, his upper lip trembling slightly. "Then yesterday, I came across a description of how he did it in my old notes. I think it would be worth taking a trip out there to have a look at what he's doing."

"What could possibly be interesting about

such a place?" I asked, baiting him to see how serious he was.

"According to the material Quastmu was obsessed with the idea of creating some sort of 'specific ecological garden' which would be a model in miniature of the interrelationships of all the links in the biosphere. You can figure out exactly what he's done once you get there..."

A cold rubbery nose pressed into my palm, so I continued walking. After a bit, the dog gently took my hand in its mouth. I understood this gesture to mean, "Stop, you've gone far enough!" Not wishing to irritate my four-legged convoy in any way, I froze to the spot. The dogs immediately sat down around me, casting frightened glances at the nearby building. The schnauzer softly barked twice, and all the dogs turned to face the long structure. I also set about examining it.

"...The temple of the Operation Lifeboat Ecological preserve resembled a fortress more than anything. The long, squat, rectangular building with rare windows cut into the pale gray walls looked somewhat like a hospital. The impression created by the center was quite gloomy on the whole, although perhaps this was due to the stark contrast between the dull building and the remarkable forest surrounding it..."

My bag was weighting me down, and I wanted to set it on the ground at my feet, but I decided not to take the risk—those darling dogs probably didn't like strangers to make any unnecessary movements. I knew enough

about schnauzers to treat them with utmost respect, for I found their disgusting habit of rather than biting ripping things to shreds utterly revolting.

All was quiet. Two storks flew low overhead, and a solitary vulture soared much higher in the bright sunlight. By then, I was beyond being surprised at anything I saw. I was just waiting patiently for one of the center's staff members to appear.

"The devil take it all!" I thought. "Azalberto is right in some ways in trying to give this place a wide berth. I can just imagine how frightened the local inhabitants must be."

The building of the ecological center was comparatively small—about fifty meters long. Its foundation of red brick, laid in the old-fashioned way, was concealed by the tall grass. Two high antennas connected by a lone wire could be seen on the roof. No other features caught the eye, save a row of identical windows with grating running along the gray walls. Actually, the rear entrance was rather interesting: the wide awning and platform meant it was undoubtedly intended for unloading tractor-trailers. They were never around when you needed them! And why weren't there any people to be found—not a single one! After all, it was broad daylight, and it wasn't lunch break.

I looked cautiously around, trying not to irritate the schnauzer. In all probability, somewhere nearby were the living quarters, warehouses, and garages. All those essential

structures couldn't possibly be contained within the small building before me!

Soon my eyes hit upon the path that led away from the building. It stretched out to the right of the entrance and soon disappeared into a thicket of ash and aspen profusely overgrown with lianas. So the living quarters and other buildings were surely at the end of that path.

Finally, the door of the long, low building swung open, and a man appeared on the threshold. Spry and sixtyish, with quicksilver eyes and a face that was not at all flabby, he kept his hand on the doorknob as if he were planning to slam the door shut right away and go back inside. This stranger was obviously holding something in the hand that remained concealed behind the door. He was dressed simply in a canvas field jacket and black trousers tucked into the legs of his high boots. A nature preserve was no place for white lab coats! None of this surprised me in the least, by the way. Moreover, the peculiar manner in which he gazed at me revealed with absolute certainty that he was a scientist. It was as if he had not been awake very long.

"Who are you?" he called out in a firm hoarse tenor without any particular intonation.

I was so glad to see another human being at long last that I totally forgot myself and took a step forward.

The schnauzer grabbed my ankle by way of warning. It hurt.

"Not so fast, you!" the stranger shouted

menacingly and moved as if he were about to retreat into the building once more.

I was amazed: one of his dogs had just attacked me as if I were some kind of a thief, and this man was about to leave me alone with my assailants.

"Listen," I shouted. "Don't leave. Tell your dogs to let me go."

The schnauzer still had its teeth clamped down on my leg, and it hurt.

"Who are you, and why have you come here?"

"I'm a journalist for the illustrated weekly *Current Events*. Tell this miserable fleabag to let go of me!"

The old man paid no attention whatsoever to my words.

"Do you have any kind of ID with you?"

I nodded.

"Toss it here."

I was speechless, for it had become perfectly obvious that the unexpected surprises which had begun with the exotic forest had by no means ended. Quastmu was obviously afraid of someone. I thought it best to do as he said, so I pulled out my press card and tossed it to the stranger. The ID described a short arc as it flew through the air and fell into the grass about three meters short of the steps that led to the entrance. I had done this intentionally, so the old man would be forced to come out and pick it up. This would allow me to glance inside the building and to find out what was concealed in his other hand at the same time.

"Fetch, Dick!" shouted the stranger.

A medium-sized spotted dog left the pack and raced to fetch my ID. The canine deftly grabbed my press card in its teeth and ran up to the old man.

"What if the dog destroys my ID?" I thought with horror, but the spotted beast had already brought the card to its master.

"Thanks, Dick," he said, dismissing the dog with a wave of his hand. He hungrily trained his gaze on my ID.

"So you are Francis Bernie?"

"Yes." I snapped. "Perhaps now you will come to my assistance..."

The old man gazed at me long and hard as if he were a mine sweeper, then he glanced at the dogs and growled:

"Let go of him. Let him pass."

With that, the old man turned abruptly and disappeared into the building.

The dogs began to stir. The schnauzer relaxed his jaws, released me, and disappeared. The rest of the mutts followed after their leader. I shifted my gym bag to my other hand, exercised my stiff wrist, and rubbed my calf that was giving me a bit of pain. At that moment, I was overcome not by pain but with amazement that the motley pack of dogs understood their master so well. They were remarkably well-trained. I was filled with wonder at this phenomenon as I walked toward the entrance.

Semi-darkness reigned inside, and the lock shut automatically behind me. I passed through a small vestibule and found myself

in a spacious hall with a multitude of large, comfortable armchairs. On a raised platform stood a color television. Human figures flashed across the screen, but the sound was turned off.

The stranger was sitting with his back to me. His skull was narrow and elongated, and his delicately moulded ears were pressed to it. His hair was cut short—almost in a crew-cut—and there was a lot of gray.

"Are you Kenneth Quastmu?" I asked in a semi-affirmative tone.

"Have a seat, young man," he said, somehow unpleasantly.

I was far from pleased at being referred to as a "young man", but I decided it was better not to comment on this, so I sat down slightly to the professor's rear.

"Why are you here?" he demanded impatiently.

"Don't you think that's a strange question to ask a journalist? Especially after such an odd welcome which could in no way be considered hospitable..."

"Bernie," he cut me off sharply, "not long ago, several dangerous men escaped from the local prison, so I have to be on the alert."

"Excuse me, but no one told me about that."

"Of course not! Why should anyone go around frightening the local people—especially when the men who escaped will be captured shortly... Who brought you here?"

"Azalberto," I replied, dumbfounded. "But

why should that make any difference to you?"

"Now I see. That means the lad still isn't afraid to go poking his nose about these parts..." mumbled the professor. He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. I noticed his wrists at once. They were thin and delicate, like those of a concert pianist. His fingers were white, but there were band-aids on two of the five.

"Professor, where are the staff and the other scientific research workers?" I inquired. "I didn't see anyone as I was coming along the path."

"Today's their day off. They've probably gone to town. They all left together in the car."

"But how could it be their day off? It's Wednesday."

"So what!?" Quastmu finally shouted, still not turning to face me. "So what if it's Wednesday! If you haven't been able to take a single day off for months on end or allow yourself even a moment's rest, then when your work is finally finished, you'll settle for any day off—be it a Wednesday, a Friday, or even a Monday!"

Even as he was shouting at me, I recalled that there had been no tracks or signs of any kind that a motor vehicle had recently been driven down the deserted road we came on. So someone had to be lying—either the professor or Azalberto, who had assured me that the road we were taking to the Lifeboat Ecological Preserve was in fact the only one. For

some reason, I was more inclined to believe the young man. Moreover, I was absolutely certain that the entire staff of such an enormous nature preserve could not possibly be taking the same day off. They couldn't just disappear into thin air all at once.

This trip was turning into something which resembled more and more a detective story, and that confused me a bit. Some disaster had probably befallen the center, something quite serious. And what Quastmu probably wanted was to conceal the details of this event from me. But I would never go along with that! I sensed that I was on the right track. I was about to make a really big catch in those murky waters! I could feel the fish nibbling at the bait.

"Has the cat got your tongue, or what?" the scientist inquired tensely.

"Well," I thought, "perhaps I should return his rudeness in spades, particularly since there are no dogs in here..."

"May I have my ID back now?"

"Of course. It's in the vestibule on the shelf. I hope you'll find it with no trouble."

Cursing silent, I rose and went to fetch my press card. I finally returned after searching for about five minutes, seething with righteous anger at such child's play.

"Professor," I shouted from across the hall, "such behaviour is hardly worthy of a man of your position! Give me back my document at once!.."

There was no one in the room. The chair

Quastmu had been sitting in a few moments before was empty. I couldn't believe my eyes, so I looked all round, but there was no one to be found—and my gym bag had disappeared along with the professor. This discovery shocked me so severely I sank into a chair and froze.

"...The run-away convicts who made their way to the ecological preserve exploited the fact that it was located far from any populated areas to make short work of the staff and scientists. Their new hideout served them well and for an extended period of time..." the phrases flowed through my mind. It seemed they were being composed by someone else and projected onto my consciousness.

"So that wasn't Quastmu at all," I thought. "Why didn't I realize it at once! He had a good reason for concealing himself in the shadows when he was standing by the opened door. And after that, he had kept his back to me intentionally when he was sitting in the chair! And that crew-cut was very suspicious, somehow..."

What an unpleasant situation. It didn't take much imagination to realize that there was no way out of the trap I had walked into so unwittingly. If there were indeed escaped convicts about, then there were probably several of them. So why the masquerade?

I rose from the armchair with the firm intention of leaving through the same door by which I had entered. At that instant, all my fears dissolved into thin air.

I had forgotten about the dogs! The dogs

couldn't possibly have recognized the criminals as their masters. They were so flawlessly obedient, after all.

I sank back into the chair and sighed loudly. It was amazing what crazy ideas had popped into my head as soon as things started getting a bit unusual.

But why had the professor run off with my gym bag, and what was he so afraid of? Who did he take me for?

I heard hurried shuffling behind me.

"Bernie! Where the devil are you?" asked the professor, appearing in the doorway at last and staring at me.

"Where are my gym bag and ID?" I asked in a low voice.

"Didn't you find it? Come with me, and I'll show you where it is. I took the liberty of putting your bag in the room I have decided to give you for the night. I thought you would realize that you should follow me."

He walked past me into the vestibule, and I went with him. My ID was indeed on the shelf in the most visible place, but I could have sworn it wasn't there a few minutes before.

"Here you go, young man."

I picked up the card and shoved it into my pocket without even glancing at it.

"And now, if you like, I will show you to your room. Please excuse me, but I'm terribly busy tomorrow, so you will have to set out for town on your own in the morning."

He turned sharply and strode across the room with the armchairs. He did not glance back, and it was as if he were sure of my total agreement. He did not worry a great deal about the elegance of his stride as he shuffled across the linoleum. I had no choice but to follow him. I had to save the situation somehow and make contact with this strange man, because my story had to be written in any case—especially since the material promised to be sensational.

After walking down two more darkened corridors with rows of doors on either side, the professor turned to the right and came to a staircase. We went up to the second floor. The third door down was mine. He stopped and pushed it open. Suddenly, the air was flooded with sunbeams in which a multitude of tiny dust particles were floating.

"Here you are!" announced Quastmu, indicating with a wave of his hand that I should enter. "You can unpack your things, and I'll be downstairs for the time being. I'll be able to answer your questions in about twenty minutes when I finish what I'm doing. So come and see me then..."

"Where will you be?"

"In the big hall where we were sitting," the professor replied, staring sternly into my eyes. There was something demanding in his gaze—demanding and searching at the same time. Something unpleasant and insinuating.

"Fine," I said. "I'll see you in twenty minutes."

With that, he left.

In the room were a closet and a narrow single bed with a night table by the headboard. Next to the night table stood a desk. The windows were opened wide, and the curtains rippled in the fresh breeze.

After making certain that the door was closed all the way, I hoisted my bag onto the desk. The locks opened with a click.

My things were just as I had packed them: underwear in the center, camera and film to the right, razor and other toiletries to the left. But my sharp eyes noticed a slight difference in the order and position. There was no doubt that Quastmu had searched my bag, though he had done so carefully in hopes that I would not realize anything had been touched. However, this did not escape my attention any more than the fact that there was another door in the vestibule in addition to the one that led from the hall.

It was simple enough to reconstruct what had happened: the professor had tricked me into searching for my ID, and while I was looking for it, he had come upstairs to examine the contents of my bag. Then he had come down another way, ascertained that I was not in the vestibule, and put my press card on the shelf. It was impossible to reproach him in any way, for I had simply failed to notice my ID and subsequently had not realized that I should have followed my host upstairs. That could be the so-called official version. But there was another alternative which was much more appropriate and much closer to the truth. The professor had indeed

feared me for some reason or other. Or maybe he had been a bit wary. So he was not telling the whole truth and had decided to check me out. But who could he possibly be afraid of and what was he expecting to recover—couldn't possibly be the escaped convicts he had mentioned... No, prisoners didn't go running around with press cards and gym bags full of unnecessary junk.

I put my camera and other toiletries on the night table by the bed. I had a feeling the camera would come in handy at some point, for after all, I needed a snapshot of the mad professor. It would look great on the cover of *Current Events* against a background of botanical and zoological wonders.

I glanced at my watch. A couple of minutes remained before the appointed time for my meeting with the professor, so I looked out the window. Right in front of me was the mighty crown of a cedar tree which appeared to be absolutely ancient. It could not possibly have grown to such a height during the relatively short period of time the Lifeboat Ecological Preserve had been in existence. So that meant unusual trees had taken root and managed to survive here somehow long before the appearance of Quastmu and his staff. Or perhaps the tree had been transplanted after it was already rather large—say, three meters in height.

I was still curious as to the whereabouts of the other residents of the ecological preserve.

It was time to go.

I concealed my dictophone in the breast pocket of my jacket, hung the camera from my neck, and left the room.

I was quite hungry by then, for I had had nothing to eat since breakfast. First, I had been rushing to meet Azalberto, and then, I had been reluctant to go fishing around in my bag for the sandwiches I had packed. On the way to the center and especially after my encounter with the dogs, I hadn't felt much like eating. I wondered if Quastmu would offer me any victuals or if the noble traditions of hospitality were totally alien to him.

The professor was sitting in the same chair. An odd light shone from the television screen where figures continued to move noiselessly about, for the sound was still off. Despite the fact that I entered quietly as a mouse, the professor sensed that I was approaching.

"Have a seat, journalist," he said dispassionately.

This time, I sat practically next to him and placed my camera on the chair beside me. I didn't want to be the one to start the conversation, for I was curious to hear what Quastmu would begin with.

"Young man," he intoned, "I hope you don't mind if I address you in such a fashion, for after all, I'm old enough to be your father..." Then he continued without waiting for my assent: "I would like to invite you to watch a bit of television with me. After all, we live in such a remote and isolated spot

that television is one of the few threads that connect us to civilization..."

Thank goodness I managed to turn the dictophone on sufficiently surreptitiously that Quastmu did not notice. I savored the thought of how best to present this whimsical scene of an old man who preferred to watch a silent television.

On a screen tinged with green, blue, and pink surged crowds of people. For some reason, all their faces and clothing seemed gray. The camera swam through the seas of people, catching scenes of cars speeding off as the lights turned green. There were shots of the enormous geometrical frames of steel and concrete buildings. Without any sound, it all seemed utterly pointless. There was an occasional close-up of a face with moist lips moving. But the eyes were inevitably blank and lifeless, so it was impossible to guess what the people were talking about. Everywhere there were people, people, and more people.

"Professor," I began cautiously, "why don't you turn on the sound?"

"The sound ruins everything, young man. When the audio is turned off, the images on the screen are a song. Unified, burning, and piercing. But the sound ruins that impression. It provides disinformation for the consciousness by sublimating human attention—substituting what is possible or desired for what is perfectly obvious," replied the professor without taking his eyes off the screen.

"But wait a minute," I interjected.

"Without the sound, the pictures are pointless. They are utterly meaningless."

"Precisely," Quastmu said, a note of interest finally creeping into his voice. He turned to me and added: "You are absolutely correct and totally off-base at once."

This was the first time I had had such a close look at his face, and a character portrait immediately formed in my mind, for I was well aware of the truthfulness and preciseness of first impressions in general.

"...The face of Professor Kenneth Quastmu reveals the strict principles he holds sacred. The features seem chased in bronze and deep lines are carved into his high forehead. His straight brows rise slightly, and his lips are tightly pursed. All these features merge to create the immediate impression of a man of great will, combined with enormous scientific talent and industriousness. However, his gray temples indicate that for him, life has not been a bed of roses. His wild, clear-blue eyes state more plainly than anything that for him, the past is but the prologue. There is nothing on earth which can keep him from attaining the goal he has set for himself!.."

"The word 'pointless' when applied to our civilization is more than a bit equivocal," explained the professor. "As far as I'm concerned, for example, everything you see on that screen has long been absolutely void of meaning for me. But the pointlessness you are referring to is the other side of the coin—the fact that the information necessary to make

everything clear is lacking. In the present case, the sound is missing. Do you see what I mean?"

Quastmu's voice had grown softer than before, and I was amazed at the virtuoso command he displayed of a whole gamut of nuances of sound. I even wondered if perhaps he had not been a professional singer or orator before he had devoted his life to science.

"I understand, of course," I said with a nod, "but your comment forces me to ask a counter-question at once: What do you mean by the word 'pointless'? And is that definition connected in any way with your retreat from the world—with your intentional withdrawal to this remote and practically inaccessible ecological preserve?"

Another face with dumbly moving lips had appeared on the screen. The close-up was of an attractive woman of thirty-five whose eyes sparkled in a semi-coquettish fashion.

I looked at the professor who had fallen silent in order to reflect upon his reply. He stared at the young woman on the screen, and I suddenly realized that he had withdrawn not only from the world in which he lived but from something much larger, indeed. The very thought made me feel a bit peculiar, and I averted my eyes so the professor would not realize I had made such a discovery.

"In other words, you want to know whether I retreated to this hermitage because I considered our world insane..."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Quastmu flashed a piercing gaze at me, knitted his brows so hard they merged into a single line, and frowned fiercely.

"Well, I guess that's the logical conclusion this discussion has led us to!" he said with a chuckle, rising. "Listen here, if you're a journalist, then why aren't you taking any notes?"

"I have an excellent memory," I replied, intrigued by his words. "And I'm more accustomed to depending on it than on a pen and paper."

"All the better. So, if you have no objections, I'll start asking questions myself to save you the trouble. And if I should err along the way, you'll inform me, of course. Do you agree?"

"Yes, why not?"

Quastmu rose and shuffled past me on his way to the wall. Only at that point did I notice that it was covered with delicate engravings which were not obvious from a distance. The subject-matter had something to do with animals. I had evidently been quite shaken up, since I had not even examined the premises in which I found myself the first time I entered the hall.

"To start with, I'll tell you about the ecological preserve, since an interest in that is most probably what brought you here. I will tell you straight off that its creation was not the most fundamental goal I set for myself when I came here. The appearance of such a forest can actually be considered a side-effect of

my basic discovery... Do you know anything about botany?"

I nodded in affirmation.

"Then you will understand me more easily when I tell you that the idea of creating a community in which almost all the known species of flora were represented was quite intriguing."

"Almost all?" I queried. "But that's impossible, because every type of plant requires..."

"Of course it's possible," affirmed Quastmu with a wry smile. "Of course it's possible. Everything is possible on this planet of ours. And if you have any doubts about it, a ten-minute walk in my garden should be more than sufficient to convince you otherwise."

"I've already had a look," I replied gloomily, insinuating that I was recalling my unpleasant experience with the dogs.

But either Quastmu failed to pick up on my hint or he didn't want to. He continued his talk dispassionately as if he were giving a lecture to an audience which was totally incapable of comprehending anything he had to say:

"I won't bore you with the complicated theoretical details or even the philosophical foundations of my discovery. But I'll try to explain a few things so you'll be better able to understand the sources of everything which is taking place here at the ecological preserve. So, young man, you probably know quite well what a virus is..."

I nodded again.

"In any case, I will remind you that a virus, according to contemporary concepts, is the very smallest division of comprehensible encoded information which is intended by nature to pass on to living things, be they animals or plants. Viruses provide information concerning adaptation."

"Wait a minute," I objected sceptically. "Aren't viruses simply miniscule creatures which are carriers of illness or disease?"

"By no means. Viruses are not creatures. Nor are they the bearers of any illnesses. Even the most terrible viral illnesses—poliomyelitis and encephalitis—are remarkable, and take careful note of this, in that they do not kill, but only cripple, and then, only one person in a hundred thousand. Those are the official statistics. So we can quite calmly relegate all viral illnesses to disturbances in the immunological system of the organism. Viruses are not foreign elements in nature. They are an organic and essential element of the environment without which adaptation and immunological systems—evolution even—are absolutely impossible."

"Evolution?"

"Yes, but I'll tell you about that aspect of the problem later. For the moment, it's sufficient to realize that in nature, viruses are simply a multitude of various genetic codes which any organism can use fully or partially in any combinations and to any ends whatsoever."

"In short," I interrupted him, elaborating upon his theme, "a virus can be considered

additional information associated with the environment."

"Yes, information which any living organism can use without exception."

"But then the question arises, where do these viruses come from?"

"What do you mean," Quastmu asked in utter shock, 'where do they come from?' We create them ourselves and set them free. Surely you know that any virus is able to restructure a living cell in such a way that it will begin to produce thousands of analogous viruses, just like a tiny factory."

"Yes, but what do we have in the first place? There are different kinds of viruses, so that means they are subject to mutation."

The professor was pacing about the hall, and at the moment of his next statement, he was directly behind me.

"Young man," he said in a different voice, calmer than a moment before, "you wouldn't happen to be hungry, would you?" His tone was sympathetic and cordial, but I was already on guard, so it all seemed suspicious to me.

"To tell the truth, I didn't have time for breakfast even today..."

"Well, it's already suppertime now. Perhaps you'd like a bite to eat..."

I found it strange that he should change the subject at the most heated moment of our discussion, but I had to submit to the professor's will. Perhaps a meal would provide the opportunity I had been looking for to win him over.

"Unfortunately, I live on bachelor's fare here," Quastmu informed me with a smile. "I have only fruit juice and sandwiches, but if you'd like some soup, you're perfectly welcome to make it yourself. I have plenty of packets of instant soup in the cupboard."

"I'm used to eating that way. I do it myself most of the time."

"Then let's go."

The professor left the room first, and I noticed he was shuffling considerably less. Could it be that our conversation had improved his muscle tone? Of course! How foolish of me not to realize that any scholar gets excited when the topic under discussion is the very one to which he devoted the best years of his life, if not his entire existence.

Oddly enough, no particular objections were raised in my mind concerning what had been said about viruses. Viruses were viruses, and that was that. In my particular line of work, I had run into all sorts of people and ideas, so my capacity for surprise had been diminished considerably if not eliminated altogether.

We passed by the opposite side of the stairwell, walked through a big wide door, and found ourselves in the cafeteria, though to be sure, there was no way such a nondescript title could fully characterize that room. Here, in addition to the usual accoutrements of a kitchen, such as a refrigerator and electric stove, stood a table from a chemistry lab with a multitude of stands with test tubes large and small, retorts, and similar glassware. In

every single vessel were traces of crusty leftovers. Although there was a large sink next to this table, it had apparently never occurred to anyone to use it.

Quastmu opened wide the snow-white door of the refrigerator in a business-like fashion and pulled out some utterly prosaic sausage and a hunk of cheese. He placed them on the table and put out two bottles of Pepsi, one for each of us. He rummaged about in the cupboard and fished out half a loaf of bread. He squeezed it and shook his head: apparently it was hard and dry.

"That's OK," he said as if attempting to justify himself. "We'll make toast."

So the professor sprinkled a little water on the slices and popped them into the toaster. By the time he completed that operation, I had already sliced the cheese and sausage, neither of which was terribly fresh. The cheese was hard as a brick, in fact, and the knife kept slipping. The sausage was dried out and a bit grayish, but it smelled OK and was perfectly edible. In general, that improvised kitchen made quite an impression on me: if the entire staff really dined in such a fashion, then the living conditions at the center could hardly be considered decent. But perhaps these discomforts were more than compensated for by the burning enthusiasm of the youthful research workers...

"My, what a fine smell!" said the professor sweetly. "The aroma of toast is one of mankind's finest inventions!" He inhaled noisily, his nostrils expanding and trembling

as if in his particular case, the sense of smell was connected directly to the muscles in his nose.

"Surely the staff has a decent cafeteria and kitchen somewhere around here," I thought. This is probably where they snack while they're working, so they won't have so far to go for lunch."

Quastmu opened both Pepsis with a flourish and finally took the lightly-browned pieces of bread from the toaster. I agilely covered each of them with cheese and sausage simultaneously, and we both took one gingerly, for they were still hot and burned our fingers. Squinting and smiling at each other, wincing from the Pepsi as its bubbles seared our throats, blowing on the piping-hot sandwiches, we began our repast. There were enough so that each of us got three. I wouldn't say we were totally sated at the end of our meal, but our stomachs were no longer empty, and they stopped growling.

"Usually," Quastmu mumbled with his mouth full, "we eat in the cafeteria by our living quarters. This is just for today," he broke off with a vague wave of his arm.

I could only grunt in reply, for the hot bits of sandwich prevented me from talking properly.

When we had finished, the professor firmly moved the empty Pepsi bottle to one side and rose, giving me to understand that our dinner break was over, and we were not required to wash the dishes. I rose and followed in his wake.

Quastmu frowned slightly and stared down at his feet as we returned to the hall. Through the stubble of his crew-cut hair, I could see the pink skin glowing. He stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his black trousers. He was still wearing heavy boots like a farmer or lumberjack. Suddenly the feeling that I was totally out of my element returned, and I grew unsure of myself once more. I shrugged slightly and waited.

"What do you write about?" Quastmu asked softly.

"I myself?"

"No, not you. Your magazine."

"About everything, including ecology and nature conservation. Haven't you ever read it?"

"No," he replied, suddenly raising his head and staring at me with small pupils so hard they bored into my face. "I've never had time. So," he continued, chewing on his lips, "you write about nature conservation."

"Among other things."

"Then tell me what you think of the present situation with respect to conservation."

"I think," I intoned with a frown, "that where there is a will, there is always a way to do something in the area of conservation..."

"Don't give me any of that unadulterated school-boy optimism of yours! Be honest for a change! Honest and a bit bolder!"

I thought for a moment:

"Wild and untrammeled nature must be concentrated in preserves and zoos."

"Forget about the zoos. That's not nature," the professor snapped almost viciously. "And what else—what follows from what you think?"

"In my opinion, if it is to survive, wild nature must do a great deal of adapting..."

"That's more like it..."

"Nature must become much more human..."

"Don't hold back!" exclaimed the professor with a note of approval in his voice.

"The only forms which will survive are those which are necessary to us, directly or indirectly, or which can adapt themselves."

"Excellent," interjected the professor and smiled with a certain amount of reserve. "And the next question is, how long do you think all of that will take?"

"I think," I began, somewhat encouraged, "that we have a hundred and fifty or two hundred years at our disposal for such processes to occur. I don't make..."

"There you have it!" he exclaimed. "The most common error of all! Terribly common, I assure you. No, young man. If you're interested in how much longer wild nature can survive in its present state—as real nature, that is—I can tell you quite precisely."

With that, he fell silent and stared at me inquiringly as if waiting for me to ask the inevitable.

"How long?" I asked eagerly.

"A maximum of fifty years."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise and chuckled to myself, thinking, "This old man has really gone overboard. Even if we examine

the last fifty or even hundred-and-fifty years in retrospective, it's evident that no major, fundamental changes have occurred in that period."

But I asked aloud: "And what is the minimum, in your opinion?"

"Whatever you say it will be!" venomously spat out Quastmu, having sensed my incredulity.

"That is..."

"It's impossible to predict. No one knows when the button will be pushed."

"What button?"

"How the hell should I know! Maybe it's a red one, or maybe it's black. A purely human button, and once it's pushed, that will be the end. The end of nature and everything else!" The old man grew perceptibly gloomy and lowered his eyes.

"He's gone off his rocker! The old coot really believes in the possibility of nuclear war," the thought flashed through my mind.

"You probably think I'm a bit cracked," Quastmu remarked unctuously. "But in point of fact, from where I am, way out here in the bush, at such a great and inaccessible distance from it all, I see everything much more clearly."

I nodded sympathetically.

"There's only one way out," he whispered fervently. "Only one."

If even a part of my capacity for curiosity or amazement had remained, I would have taken an interest in the professor's remarks, but the day had been so filled with

surprises that I had lost all initiative. Now I was thinking only about how best to construct my story. Suddenly, the recent conversation about viruses which had been interrupted by Quastmu's suggestion that we have a bite to eat flashed into my mind.

"Professor," I asked politely, "I don't quite understand the connection between viruses and what I saw in your ecological garden."

He walked over to the wall and stopped with his back to me. This was not the first time during the course of our conversation that he had executed such a maneuver. So it was probably his habit to behave in such a fashion with interlocutors.

Quastmu stood silently before the monotone vertical wall and seemed to be lost in the act of studying the unvarying pattern of its rough surface.

"Let's set aside the question of illness for the moment," he began tiredly, "and examine only viral persistence."

"What?" I asked, not comprehending at all.

"Persistence is the length of time a virus is located within an organism. It has been proven that the presence of one virus or another over a period of time results in immunity to the given illness. But that is not absolutely precise. The virus can no longer call forth the particular illness associated with it. It would be more precise to say that falling ill with a virus is not exactly being ill, but if I may express it in such a fashion, adaptation to

alternations in environmental conditions. Viruses fulfil the function of 'fine-tuning' the organism, if you will. By uniting with the genetic apparatus of the cell, the gene of the virus acts as a type of genetic pool, providing information for all biological systems." This said, the professor fell silent and wiped his face with his hand in a state of exhaustion. About then, he started pacing about the room again, which gave me a fine view of his profile.

The sun was low above the horizon, and its rays no longer fell into the room through the barred windows. Still, it was far from dark outside, and the hall was filled with a relaxing twilight, emphasized by the long shadows of the armchairs. Kenneth Quastmu faced me in three-quarter profile, shrouded in dusk; his eye sockets and the hollows of his cheeks appeared to be spots of black.

"Now if I tell you that I helped all the flora here adapt to the local conditions, will you be less surprised?"

"With the aid of viruses?"

"Precisely."

"Professor," I began softly, "perhaps I'm still pretty young, but even I know that this is not the age of the lone selectionist working without assistance from or interreaction with his colleagues. How could it be that your discovery was lying out in the open, right on the surface, unrecognized by thousands of other researchers?"

Quastmu turned sharply to me, his eyes gleaming wildly. But his face was lost in the

shadows, so I couldn't determine his expression.

"Why 'out in the open'? Why 'right on the surface'?" he asked almost gently. "You are accusing me of having no intellect whatsoever when in fact, I am a genius!"

I froze, rooted to the spot, my mouth hanging open. This was not the first time I had ever met a scholar who had voiced with such assurance that he was talented or even exceptional—but a genius—why, that was a bit too much! No one had the right to claim such a title for himself..."

"You seem surprised..."

I didn't say a word.

"Well, you mustn't be surprised. I really am a genius—in all seriousness, and in the fullest meaning of the word."

I thought to myself that he was probably not feeling quite himself and that that had more than likely been the reason for the incident with my press card and gym bag. Why hadn't I noticed right from the start that he was not quite normal? Perhaps he was kept locked up by himself in this building with barred windows, and an ambulance with dozens of burly male attendants was speeding to my assistance, to rescue me from the clutches of this madman.

However, Quastmu continued to stand there before me. He glanced at me, waiting for some reaction. Therefore, it would be better if I gave no indication of the idea which had just occurred to me.

"Why are you silent?"

"I'm thinking," I said to gain time and give myself a chance to concentrate.

"About what?"

"About whether or not it is possible for a person working all alone, even if he is a genius, to make such a discovery..."

"But I'm not alone," Quastmu spat out, almost obnoxiously.

"That's true. You've only been at Operation Lifeboat for the last ten years..."

"Precisely. And before that I was one of the leading researchers at a major scientific institute. And it doesn't really matter what kind. That is not where my genius lies. It lies in something else entirely."

"So when you were working with your team of specialists, you used the research of dozens or even hundreds of other scientists to make your discovery. Then after you had made it, you disappeared into the bush to develop your ecological garden and make a name for yourself..."

"Nonsense. I could care less about fame!"

"Then why..."

"Because," he cut me short abruptly, "my most brilliant stroke of genius lay far ahead at that point. That bit of genius consisted not in the actual discovery itself but in its application. Its practical and rational application!" he concluded, trying to drive the idea home.

"Wait a minute. I've lost you here. Let's go back to the ecological garden. What was it that you succeeded in inventing, in thinking up, as it were?"

"Just before our improvised supper, you noted," said Quastmu in a slightly contemptuous tone, "that viruses must be capable of mutation. And you were absolutely correct. You are a genuine journalist, for you got right to the heart of the matter immediately, although you did not realize it then. So now, listen to me. Until recently, it was thought that viral mutations occurred quite by chance. However, I have proven that this is far from the case. Viral mutations can be regulated and predicted at will. Moreover, when these mutations are forced to occur in such a desirable and predictable fashion, they are subject to the same laws which determine the course of evolution on a planet-wide basis. Do you see what I mean? From this, it follows that the very course of evolution on Earth has always been brought about by viruses—those miniscule, semi-living entities. It was thanks to viruses that everything on Earth gradually grew legs in place of fins and adapted to new conditions on dry land. Viruses made possible the appearance of reptiles, then eliminated them, clearing the way for mammals. It was viruses that modified the internal and external appearance of everything living until, finally, the forms we are accustomed to thinking of as 'rational' or 'self-conscious' appeared."

He fell silent, and before my eyes swam cartoon-like images of microscopic organisms invisibly deciding the fates of whole generations of gigantic earthly creatures.

Outside, darkness began to fall.

"As far as the ecological garden is concerned that was all quite simple. As soon as a plant realized that it could not possibly survive under these conditions and was ready to wilt and die, I gave it a virus which would enable it to restructure some of its organs in a specific manner that would allow it to survive. As a rule, the plants made use of these viruses." He ended his explanation in a tired tone. "Let's watch a bit of television, shall we?"

I bit my lower lip, tried to digest all that I had heard, and attempted to hear whether the dictophone had stopped or not. As a rule, it was impossible to reconstruct such conversations from memory.

The armchair Quastmu chose was again slightly in front of me. He unconsciously tried to maintain a certain distance between us.

The television glowed dumbly in the thickening darkness.

"If the silence bothers you, I can turn on some music."

The professor rose and walked to the front of the hall. Then he went back to his place and sat down. When he took his seat, the music began to play.

"Bach," he said in a new, pensive tone. "Are you familiar with Bach?"

"Yes."

"Oddly enough, Bach was sure he had a specific mission here on Earth, and that he had to carry it out."

"And what was this mission?" I inquired, my curiosity piqued at long last.

"He thought that he had been sent to Earth to tell people in the universally comprehensible language of music about nature—the environment they lived in—about all its complexities and subtle interconnections, about universal resonance and harmony. Precisely for that reason, much of his polyphonic music remains a mystery to us to this day. And he wrote quite a lot, by the way. He worked constantly, never allowing himself to rest. He worked till his last days and died at sixty-five."

"Is that so?"

"During his lifetime, he gained renown as a performer only. His compositions were considered too intellectual and mathematically precise... But time has put everything in its proper place."

The first austere chords died out, and the slow prelude was followed by fast passages: the intricately interwoven melodic voices of a fugue.

"Quastmu is right," I thought, turning my mind from all previous subjects of reflection. "Bach is perfectly compatible with contemporary modes of thought."

"But all the same," I began a new attack, "when speaking of genius, you were referring to nothing more than the simple adaptation of plants to a new environment, even if the method of achieving this adaptation was rather amazing..."

"Of course," replied the professor, speaking slowly to emphasize each word. "The genius of it all consists in that I must now transform our world. And I have already begun

my great and noble mission of creating harmony where none existed before!"

His words rang out with the solemnity reminiscent of an attack of megalomania. This strange professor was a complex individual indeed: he had a bit of everything—psychological disorders, enormous talent, and vast inner strength tied into an amazing Gordian knot. I studied his face with curiosity in the dim light of the television screen.

"My ecological garden is but a modest beginning," continued Quastmu with inspiration. "The main idea here is much more profound. More global, I would say. I decided to call my project Operation Lifeboat for good reason. In the beginning, so very long ago, just like you, young man, I thought that every living thing on the planet could survive only if it learned to adapt itself to man and his needs. But later, I realized how wrong that idea was. Up till now, man has always been the focal point of evil. At least in his present form. He can do nothing but destroy, adapt everything around him to his own needs, and rule over it."

"Wait a minute," I objected. "Aren't you forgetting that man is the greatest creator of all..."

"The greatest creator of all is nature!" Quastmu retorted sharply. "Not man. What has man ever created? He only destroys whatever lies in his path. He grinds up anything he needs to build his anthills: he burns forests, coal, oil, or peat—whatever he can get his hands on. And his greatest invention is the

exploitation of atomic energy. Just think what he does for that—atomic fission! Even here, destruction reigns supreme. The time is long past when man was fit to live hand in hand with nature, when the warmth of the sun, when a natural dam or wind energy were sufficient for his needs. No, now he has to burn, explode, or dissemble the entire world in his pursuit of expedient advantage. And to hell with what happens later as a consequence of his present insane actions!" With this, Quastmu half-turned toward me and gesticulated wildly with one hand.

I assumed he had expressed his innermost ideas to me and had revealed himself in his true form—open and angry.

"And if aggressiveness should take control of his unstable consciousness," the professor piped up unexpectedly, "then he will turn this planet into a marvelous torch. Why should everything perish due to some human whim? Even the insects, of which there are more known varieties than the visible stars in the sky?" With that, Quastmu turned away from me in his chair and fell silent.

Neither did I make a sound.

The TV program ended, and a cartoon began. The darkness that engulfed the room was particularly thick and billowed about near the ceiling. The music grew calmer and simpler like a slight, lazy breeze that caressed the ear.

It gave me gooseflesh. Even taking into account the megalomania, Quastmu had managed to create such a state of conscious-

ness in me that I considered even mo[illegible]tal questions without my use [illegible].

The music faded away.

A low bark sounded in the yard.

The professor rose and walked over to the window.

"Is that you, George?"

The bark was replaced by whining.

"Go on, fellow. Let Reuger feed you. I'm busy right now."

The imploring bark was repeated, but in a lower tone.

"No," said Quastmu, raising his voice, "that's not necessary, now go on."

It fell quiet outside, and Quastmu walked away from the window. He drew closer to me and seemed transformed into a dark blotch which loomed above me.

I instinctively grew tense and began to tremble from an attack of nerves.

"Listen to me, journalist!" he said. "I have learned how to control the mutation of viruses, and I have gone one step farther than nature. In addition to ordinary viruses which the organism uses for its own purposes, I have created special viruses which work independently of the desire of the organism to make use of them or not." This said, he gave a crooked smile. I realized he was smiling only from the gleam of his teeth which I could barely make out in the gloom.

"In only two months' time," he whispered heatedly right into my face, "a man is transformed into a dog or a monkey. Or whatever. Do you understand? I infect people—

anyone at all—with my virus, and after a couple of months of 'adaptation', I have a fine, extremely intelligent hound!"

I drew back sharply, opening my eyes wide. He really was a maniac!

"The only problem is that these viruses don't multiply. Unfortunately, thus far I have been unable to evoke a chain of infections, but that is only a technical problem there are many ways of solving."

The tape in my dictophone ran out, and it hissed softly to inform me of this fact.

"Your tape has run out, journalist," Quastmu announced, moving away from my chair.

I sighed more freely and tugged at my shirt collar to loosen it. Then I unhurriedly pulled out the dictophone and changed the tape.

"A short time passes, and they all sing a different tune. They all realized that Mother Nature's power is boundless."

I remained silent, wondering to what extent I could trust Quastmu's words. If what he said was true, it was simply nightmarish. Could it really be that this madman was bent on destroying civilization by biological means? I attempted to imagine what it would be like when, after that unusual epidemic, all the people on Earth woke up dogs. How horrible! The only result would be the death of millions, while the colossal structure of our human world would be utterly destroyed. Everything that had been created

in the course of many thousands of years would vanish.

"Now tell me honestly, journalist—what do you think of this idea? But no hypocrisy, please. It's hopeless."

"That's ridiculous, Professor," I said, not recognizing my own voice. It was filled with some previously untapped reserves of inner strength and staunchness—it was as if countless generations of human beings struggling for their future had risen up within me. "It's terrifying to hear such things from you."

"Why is it so terrifying for you to think about such a thing as 'oh, how horrible—civilization will die out, and people will perish'?!" he said, mimicking my thoughts at the end. "So what?" he pressed on in a more severe and demanding tone. The professor walked back over to the window, and his figure appeared black against the background of the sky, which was not completely dark yet.

"Our civilization is pointless, and all that is pointless is doomed to extinction. Yes, to extinction! But I offer everyone without exception a chance. After all, there can't be a nuclear war without soldiers, and animals are not soldiers. But maybe I'll turn a few people into something other than dogs! After all, my dogs are only the first step on the road to saving the Earth's biosphere. I am certain I can transform any creature into any other one. Just imagine—we can eliminate the problem of endangered and rare species. A

dose of a certain virus, a short incubation period, and we can produce some kind of practically extinct tortoise or Przhevalsky's horse. A fascinating prospect, you must admit!" Quastmu was clearly getting carried away, for he started talking louder and louder. His words rang out in the hall and carried far beyond its walls, for he was standing, as before, by the open window.

"My discovery will allow complete ecological balance and rational, truly human relations among all groups and types of animals. And as for the plant kingdom, I shall transform the biggest idiots of all into trees so they won't bother anyone or anything else. I can just imagine what thick bark and opaque leaves such trees will have!"

"Professor Quastmu!" I screamed almost hysterically, "the implementation of your plan will condemn millions to death, because dogs can't feed themselves, and animals are much more aggressive on the whole than man. They will become uncontrollable. And you are forgetting completely that the numbers of such vicious carnivores as lions, tigers, and panthers will go up sharply as soon as the potential food supply increases. How will your dog-people be able to defend themselves against these wild beasts? And what about civilization? Your plan will mean the end to centuries of progress and development!

"They have led us to the brink of nuclear war. You say that millions will perish? So what? Have not millions of wild animals died as a result of passing and senseless human fan-

cies? I am not going to provide you with any examples, because you are already aware of hundreds of them. And people can always resist beasts of prey with that which allowed them to become rational beings—joint, collective action. So what if a few people get eaten? Some will always survive. Even if a half or two-thirds of them are destroyed, that will be all right. If even one-tenth of what is in existence now survives, that will be more than enough."

"Enough for what?" filled with horror, I was grasping at straws, and I knew it. Suddenly I realized quite clearly that Quastmu was not joking in the least.

"Enough to create a new world that is purer and more honest than the present one. A world where man's relationship with the plant and animal kingdom will be transformed, since people's attitudes toward the environment will be quite different than at present. Perhaps man will stop desiring death for everything around him, including his fellow men. The world needs a good shaking up. This metalized, nickel-plated civilization, this mechanized humanity must be offered the alternative of maximum biologization. I am sure that this latter process will bear the necessary fruits."

"But don't you see that civilization will perish. It will perish inevitably, because not a single animal on Earth except for man has the ability to create culture."

"Civilization in its present form will perish, yes. But I am speaking of another type which

can arise only from the ruins of the old. And then who ever told you that I planned to turn absolutely all the human beings on Earth into animals? That is a misconception, after all. A small group of men who agree with my ideas will remain, and they will be in a position to control the massive restructuring of the planet's ecology."

"Now I see—the bosses will remain! And they'll probably have all the machine guns as well..."

Quastmu walked away from the window and shuffled toward the door.

"I see that you hold an opinion," he hissed in an unpleasant tone of voice, "which is counter to mine, and that is truly a pity!"

Suddenly I was struck by the fact that I was in mortal danger—that my desire to press this mad old man for answers could lead to my becoming a very high-class pooch. I understood why the professor had checked my documents and rummaged in my bag. He had plenty to be wary of and was probably expecting visitors or inspectors from another branch of the network of nature preserves that dotted the country. But fortunately for him, no one suspected a thing as yet. I also realized why the dogs here were so intelligent and why the local residents referred to this place as "the Devil's garden."

"Quastmu," I shouted hoarsely, "are your dogs..."

"You guessed it. My colleagues who did not share my opinions, and that was extremely dangerous to my mission. Too bad—I had

such high hopes that..." He paused right by the door. "I spent almost fifteen years preparing the soil in an attempt to raise their consciousnesses so they would accept my ideas. Actually, during that period, they changed quite a lot. Each became what he was in actuality. Two remarkable people worked here, and now I miss them more than anyone. Unlike the rest of the mutts you saw running around here, they became large pure-bred dogs."

"The schnauzer and the Alsatian?"

"Precisely. Good night!" He stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

The television was still on, and as before, the silent, senseless scenes continued.

The Bach had ended long before.

I wondered if he had infected me or not. My heart pounded as wild thoughts raced through my head. How had he done it? Had he put the virus in the Pepsi or the toast?

I could almost hear my heart beating.

Perhaps he hadn't yet managed to infect me. Or maybe he had just decided to frighten me into agreeing to his conditions so I would cooperate with him.

I cursed the day and the hour I had decided to come to this preserve to do research for my story.

He probably hadn't managed to infect me yet. There was at least that one dim ray of hope. Perhaps he had only taken the initial steps today—but tomorrow...

I had to get out of there!

I was no longer afraid of the dogs or the other delights of his horrible ecological garden. Surely I could reach some agreement with the dogs, since they had once been people. They might not be as unquestioningly obedient to him as he thought. At most, they had probably hoped that eventually, he would free them from his spell and release them from their sufferings.

I rose cautiously and took several steps which seemed noiseless enough to me. This filled me with hope.

Kenneth Quastmu had dissolved in the quiet. After the sound of his shuffling steps died out in the distance, only the chirping of cicadas could be heard in the yard. My head was spinning from the thousands of thoughts which engulfed my brain.

The corridor and vestibule were infinitely long and dark. However, my memory served me well, and I could recall down to the minutest detail where the simple furniture was located. I managed to creep past it without making a single sound.

Finally, I reached the exit.

I located several locks and a sturdy, wide metal bolt which gave way easily, without any noise at all. Two of the locks barely squeaked as I opened them. But I froze when I suddenly heard my heart pounding with terror.

I could hear footsteps far in the distance—probably on the stairs.

I began fiddling with the third and final lock, but it was the most complicated. When I

finally figured out how it worked. It gave a hollow click as it slid open. The noise was sufficiently loud to make me freeze once more.

"Bernie!" a hysterical howl rang out. "Get away from that door this instant! Have you lost your mind!!!"

I instinctively tugged at the door without even thinking. Nothing happened. I remembered that it opened in the other direction and pushed it away from me.

"Stop!" rang out a horrible scream along with the thudding of approaching footsteps.

I was about to run away when a huge furry body flew at me and knocked me off my feet. I fell on my back and saw that a second dog was already racing into the darkened rooms.

"A-a-a-h!" Quastmu screamed in a horrible voice, and shots rang out at once. Cruel, malicious barking, howling, and whining could be heard in reply. Something collapsed with a soft thud, and a tussle ensued. The shooting ceased.

Though my mind was foggy, I rose to my feet and raced away, not caring a whit about what was taking place in that madhouse. My only desire was to get as far away as possible, and as quickly as I could! But I had barely gotten down the steps when my knees buckled under me. I collapsed into the grass and lost consciousness. When I came to some time later, I felt like I was burning up inside. Convulsions racked my body, and I was sick on my stomach.

I realized immediately what had happened...

* * *

A glaring patch of sunlight was falling through brightly illuminated leaves right in my eyes. I turned a bit and relaxed again.

Raoul had already recovered. He was lying next to me, his long pink tongue lolling, panting.

When my period of "adaptation" had ended, and I realized I had become the proud possessor of a big, reddish tale and the long-haired fur of a collie, his wounds were already healing.

Kenneth Quastmu had managed to shoot the Great Schnauzer, whose name was Raoul, in three places. But thank goodness, all three bullets grazed only muscles, which did not prevent the dog from lunging at the diabolic professor's throat and slashing it with his vicious teeth.

André—a large gray Alsatian—and all the other mutts look after us. André is very skilful and is better than all the others at opening the refrigerators filled with boxes of food from Kenneth Quastmu's supplies. Our food intake is strictly rationed, and only Raoul and I receive as much as we want.

André dragged Quastmu's corpse to the farthest corner of the ecological garden where coyotes and carrion-crows occasionally appear. None of us has gone there since.

Both Raoul and André had mastered the art of writing more or less legibly in the sand with their forepaws. I had to learn the same.

So now we exchange impressions in a spec a square behind the long low brick building of the center. This difficult and painstaking task has taught us to be laconic.

The rest of the mutts also get their fair share of the food, but I don't pay any particular attention to them. They are all increasingly losing their resemblance to human beings. They often quarrel noisily, fight, then choose and rechoose their leaders. Once they even attempted to attack Reuger, the only monkey among us, and the one who had the keys to the storehouse. But he can easily take cover in the high branches of the trees.

Reuger feeds us and gives us water, since his extremities are infinitely better suited to dealing with human mechanisms such as fawcets, handles, and refrigerators...

Now that Raoul and I were firmly back on our feet, it was high time to carry out the plan we had been working on all this time. Raoul and I would have to go for the simple reason that we did not look at all like wolves, but rather, our fine breeding was immediately evident. Moreover, Raoul could write better in the sand than the other dogs. Reuger would be able to explain himself even more easily, but we could not take the monkey along, since he would not be able to withstand the long trek across the open plains—a journey which might take several days.

My dictophone—or rather the tape of my conversation with Quastmu—would have a

major role to play here. Its impassioned confessions would go a long way toward explaining immediately the essence of the matter. Moreover, it would attract attention, for it was not often that one saw a dog trotting down the street with a cassette tape fastened to its neck.

André, who was remaining behind, would have more than enough to keep him busy. It would be far from simple to ride herd on this motley pack of mutts. He would have to keep his eyes peeled for sure. Moreover, Reuger was determined to continue the search for the antidotes which were surely hidden somewhere in Quastmu's arsenals. After all, the professor himself had somehow managed not to become infected with his own viruses! But it would be better for Reuger to refrain from too much meddling as it was uncertain what other monstrosities he would release from the Pandora's box that was Quastmu's laboratory.

We could not possibly just wait for someone to happen our way. We were in total agreement on this point. I, for example, had been the only visitor in the four months previous. Moreover, it was entirely possible that the next humans who turned up might start rummaging about in the professor's lab and inadvertently find themselves united to our pack.

Reuger gave us double rations the day before we were to set off. The other mutts put up a racket about it, but they quieted down as soon as André barked a couple

of times. Fortunately, they were quite cowardly.

I felt a strange yet pleasant excitement in my soul: I thought it was a sense of kinship with everything around me, a feeling of certainty and hope that everything would end well. After all, there were a lot of us, and we were all people!

Something of my old reporter's spirit began to awake within me.

"...The sensations experienced by a man who literally finds himself in a dog's shoes cannot be put across in words. The whole world around is transformed, for the angle of vision is closer to the earth. And my, what smells! At first it seems that you have acquired some new unheard of sense as you begin to distinguish the various shades of smell. If I am ever transformed back into a human being, this marvelous heightened sense is what I shall definitely miss the most. But what am I talking about? With the new viruses of the late Professor Kenneth Quastmu, it will probably be possible to acquire any qualities and sensations one should happen to desire..."

The closer the hour of departure drew, the more often my head was filled with material for my future story. I would do a thorough job, to be sure, and it would be a sensation in all the major magazines. I would call it simply "Operation Lifeboat" and make sure that next to it was the color slide of me in the shape of a collie.

So we would set off the following day!

Raoul, who appeared to be no more than a coal black spot as he lay in the prickly emerald grass, smiled at me with just his eyes and nodded.

I barked once in reply and wagged my tail.

THE END

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